

The Book of Genesis, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 20: Back to Bethel; the Generations of Esau

Genesis 35:1–36:43

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

These chapters bring Jacob back to Bethel for spiritual renewal, carry him through a season of significant losses, and close with the generations of Esau. Doctrinally, the lesson teaches God's call to return to Him, the necessity of putting away idols for wholehearted worship, God's faithfulness in renewing His covenant, faith that walks with God through grief, and, in the genealogy of Esau, both God's faithfulness to His word and a sober contrast between the world's quick, impressive success and the slow road of covenant promise.

Draw out the renewal theme as the heart of chapter thirty-five. Jacob's return to Bethel is a picture of spiritual return and revival: going back to the place of first devotion, finishing an unkept vow, and decisively putting away the idols the family had tolerated for years. This models for believers the pattern of repentance and renewal, returning to God and removing what competes with Him. The losses that follow show that walking with God does not exempt us from grief, but that faith keeps walking, and even turns sorrow toward hope (Ben-oni becoming Benjamin).

Handle the Esau genealogy of chapter thirty-six with its intended point. It shows God keeping His word that Esau would become a nation, displaying His faithfulness even to those outside the covenant line. And it sets up a quiet but important contrast, developed in Psalm 73 and elsewhere: the wicked and the worldly often flourish quickly and impressively, while God's people walk a slower, harder road of promise. Lead students not to envy the fast success of the world but to trust the long road that leads, finally, to Christ and to lasting blessing. Formationally, call students to return to God, bury their idols, renew their commitment, walk faithfully through loss, and value the path of promise above worldly flourishing.

Question 1

Student Question:

God called Jacob, "Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there," back to the place of his first encounter with God and his long-unkept vow (35:1). What does this teach us about God's call to return to Him, and about the importance of finishing what we have promised Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

After the disaster at Shechem, God speaks: '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' (35:1). God

calls Jacob back to Bethel, the place of the ladder, the vow, and his first real encounter with God. It is a call to return.

Notice what Bethel represents. It was where Jacob, a frightened fugitive, met God and vowed that the Lord would be his God (28:20–22). But in the years since, Jacob had settled elsewhere, prospered, compromised near Shechem, and left that vow unfinished. God’s call to ‘go up to Bethel’ is a call to return to first devotion and to complete what he had promised.

Draw out the doctrine of return. God graciously calls His drifting people back to Himself. This is the heart of repentance and renewal: returning to the place of devotion we have wandered from, and finishing the commitments we have left undone. ‘Return to me, and I will return to you’ (Malachi 3:7).

Help students see the importance of finishing our vows. Jacob had made a promise to God twenty years earlier and not kept it. God’s call presses the point: what we promise God matters, and He calls us to complete, not merely begin, our commitments to Him (Ecclesiastes 5:4–5).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God’s gracious call to return to Him (Genesis 35:1; Malachi 3:7).
- Bethel as the place of first devotion, to be returned to.
- Repentance and renewal as returning to the place we have wandered from.
- The importance of finishing our vows and commitments to God (Ecclesiastes 5:4–5).

Discussion Prompts

- What did Bethel represent in Jacob’s life?
- Why did God call him to return there?
- What does it mean that God calls His drifting people back?

Question 2

Student Question:

Where might God be calling you to “return to Bethel,” back to a place of devotion, obedience, or commitment you have drifted from? What first step could you take to return?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question applies the call to return to the student’s life. Many believers can identify a ‘Bethel,’ a season or place of deeper devotion, clearer obedience, or firmer commitment, from which they have since drifted. God’s call to Jacob is His call to them: return.

Help students locate the drift. It is often gradual and unnoticed, a prayer life that thinned, a zeal that cooled, a commitment quietly abandoned, a closeness to God that faded into routine. Naming where we have drifted from is the first step toward returning.

Encourage a concrete first step. Returning to God rarely requires a dramatic gesture; it begins with a turning of the heart and a resumption of the basics, prayer, the Word, gathered worship, obedience in a specific area. Like Jacob, we ‘arise and go up.’

Invite reflection: where the student has drifted from a place of devotion or an unkept commitment, and one concrete step they could take this week to return to God there.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Identifying where we have drifted from devotion or commitment.
- Drift as gradual and often unnoticed.
- Returning beginning with a turning of the heart and a first step.
- Resuming the basics of walking with God.

Discussion Prompts

- Where have you drifted from a place of devotion or commitment?
- What does your ‘Bethel’ look like, and how far have you wandered?
- What first step could you take to return this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

Before going up to Bethel, Jacob commanded his household, “Put away the foreign gods that are among you and purify yourselves” (35:2–4). What is an idol, and why is removing our idols essential for wholehearted worship of God (compare 1 John 5:21)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Before going up to Bethel, Jacob gives a striking command: ‘Put away the foreign gods that are among you and purify yourselves and change your garments’ (35:2). For years, idols had been tolerated in Jacob’s household, tucked away in the baggage. You cannot worship the true God at Bethel with other gods in your tent.

Define idolatry broadly for the class. An idol is anything we love, trust, serve, or look to for life more than God, anything that takes the place in our hearts that belongs to Him alone. It need not be a carved image; it can be money, success, a relationship, comfort, reputation, control, or pleasure. ‘Little children, keep yourselves from idols’ (1 John 5:21).

Stress why removing idols is essential, not optional. God will not share His glory with another (Isaiah 42:8). Wholehearted worship requires undivided allegiance. As long as the idols remain in the baggage, the worship at Bethel is compromised. Renewal always involves not only adding devotion but removing rivals.

Note that Jacob buried the idols (35:4). The putting away was decisive and final, not a half-measure. True repentance does not merely loosen its grip on idols; it buries them. Help students see that dealing with idols requires decisive action, not vague intentions.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Idolatry as anything loved, trusted, or served more than God (1 John 5:21).
- Idols often hidden and tolerated for years.
- Wholehearted worship requiring undivided allegiance (Isaiah 42:8).
- Decisive, final dealing with idols, not half-measures (Genesis 35:4).

Discussion Prompts

- What is an idol, beyond a carved image?
- Why is removing idols essential for true worship?
- What does it mean that Jacob buried the idols decisively?

Question 4

Student Question:

What idols, anything you love, trust, or serve more than God, do you most need to identify and put away in your own life? What makes them so hard to bury?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the matter of idols into the student's own heart. The hardest part is often identifying them, because our idols are usually good things that have taken God's place, and they hide in the baggage of respectable lives.

Help students discern their idols by asking diagnostic questions: What do I most fear losing? What do I daydream about? Where do I turn for comfort and security? What, if I lost it, would make life feel not worth living? The answers often reveal where our hearts have set up rival gods.

Address why idols are hard to bury. We cling to them because we believe, at some level, that they give us what only God can give, security, worth, pleasure, control. Burying an idol means trusting that God is better than the thing we are releasing, which requires faith.

Invite a concrete step: the idol the student most needs to identify and put away, and a decisive action toward 'burying' it, trusting that God Himself is a greater treasure than anything they release.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Identifying idols, often good things in God's place.

- Diagnostic questions to reveal the heart's rival gods.
- Idols held because we believe they give what only God can give.
- Burying idols as an act of faith that God is better.

Discussion Prompts

- What do you most fear losing, or turn to for comfort and security?
- What idol does that reveal in your heart?
- What would it take to decisively bury it?

Question 5

Student Question:

At Bethel God appeared again, renewed the name Israel, and reaffirmed the covenant promises (35:9–12). What does this renewal teach us about God's faithfulness and about the value of returning to Him to have our commitment renewed?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

At Bethel, God appears to Jacob again and renews everything: He confirms the new name Israel, reveals Himself as God Almighty, and reaffirms the covenant promises of land and descendants and blessing (35:9–12). Jacob's return to God is met by God's gracious renewal of the covenant.

Draw out God's faithfulness. The promises do not change; God reaffirms to Jacob what He had said before, steadying him after a season of failure, compromise, and loss. When we return to God, we find Him faithful, ready to renew and steady us in His promises.

Note the value of returning to be renewed. Jacob did not receive new promises so much as a fresh confirmation of old ones, and that renewal strengthened him for the road ahead. We too need seasons of returning to God to have our commitment and our grasp of His promises renewed.

Help students see the rhythm of the spiritual life: we drift, we return, God renews. This is not a single event but a recurring pattern. Regular returning, in repentance, in worship, in renewed surrender, keeps us close to God and steadies us in His unchanging promises.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's faithfulness in renewing His covenant after our failure (Genesis 35:9–12).
- God's promises unchanging; He reaffirms and steadies us.
- The value of returning to God to be renewed.
- The rhythm of drifting, returning, and renewal in the spiritual life.

Discussion Prompts

- What did God renew with Jacob at Bethel?
- What does this reveal about God's faithfulness when we return?
- Why do we need recurring seasons of renewal?

Question 6

Student Question:

When was the last time you deliberately renewed your commitment to God? What would it look like to do that now, surrendering yourself afresh to Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question invites students to renew their own commitment to God. The Christian life is not sustained by a single decision but by repeated returning and fresh surrender. Like Jacob at Bethel, we benefit from deliberate moments of recommitment.

Help students see the value of such renewal. Over time, our devotion erodes almost imperceptibly; deliberate seasons of recommitment, whether in private prayer, at the Lord's table, in response to the Word, counteract the drift and re-center our lives on God.

Make it concrete. Renewing commitment might mean a specific time of prayer surrendering ourselves afresh, confessing and turning from a particular sin, recommitting to a neglected discipline, or simply telling God again, honestly, 'You are my God.' It is the heart's return to wholehearted devotion.

Invite a present response: when the student last deliberately renewed their commitment to God, and a concrete way to do so now, surrendering themselves afresh to Him at their own 'Bethel.'

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Renewing our commitment to God as a recurring need.
- Deliberate recommitment counteracting gradual drift.
- Concrete forms of renewal: prayer, the Lord's table, response to the Word.
- The heart's return to wholehearted devotion.

Discussion Prompts

- When did you last deliberately renew your commitment to God?
- What would surrendering yourself afresh to Him look like now?
- How can regular renewal keep you from drifting?

Question 7

Student Question:

The journey to and from Bethel was marked by deep losses, the deaths of Deborah, of beloved Rachel in childbirth, and of Isaac, yet Jacob kept walking with God, even renaming his grief-born son “son of my right hand” (35:8, 18–19, 29). What does this teach us about walking with God through grief and loss?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The road to and from Bethel is marked by graves. Deborah, Rebekah’s faithful nurse, dies and is buried under an oak. Then beloved Rachel dies in childbirth, an especially bitter loss for Jacob. And finally old Isaac dies, and the reconciled brothers bury him together. Walking with God did not exempt Jacob from deep grief.

Draw out the honest realism. Faith does not insulate us from loss; the faithful grieve. Jacob, the man who met God at Bethel, also stood at the graves of those he loved. The life of faith includes real sorrow, and Scripture does not pretend otherwise.

Note how Jacob kept walking with God through the grief. He did not abandon the journey or his God; he buried his dead, marked the places, and went on. And in a beautiful touch, when Rachel with her dying breath named the baby Ben-oni, ‘son of my sorrow,’ Jacob renamed him Benjamin, ‘son of my right hand,’ turning even his grief toward hope. Faith grieves, but it also reaches for hope.

Help students see the pattern for their own losses. We can walk with God through sorrow, neither denying the pain nor being destroyed by it, and even, by faith, turn our griefs toward hope, because we serve the God of resurrection who will one day wipe away every tear (Revelation 21:4).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Faith not exempting us from grief and loss (Genesis 35:8, 19, 29).
- The faithful grieving honestly, without pretense.
- Continuing to walk with God through sorrow.
- Turning grief toward hope (Ben-oni to Benjamin), trusting the God of resurrection (Revelation 21:4).

Discussion Prompts

- What losses marked Jacob’s journey, and how did he respond?
- What does it mean that the faithful still grieve?
- How did Jacob turn grief toward hope, and how can we?

Question 8

Student Question:

How do you tend to respond to grief and loss, do you draw nearer to God or pull away? How might you keep walking with God, and even find hope, in the middle of sorrow?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question applies the theme of grief to the student's experience. Loss comes to everyone, and how we respond reveals and shapes our faith. The crucial question is whether grief drives us toward God or away from Him.

Help students notice their tendency. Some, in grief, draw near to God, casting their sorrow on Him; others pull away, growing distant, angry, or numb. Both responses are common, but only the first leads to comfort and growth. God invites us to bring our grief to Him.

Offer the resources of faith. We grieve, but 'not as others do who have no hope' (1 Thessalonians 4:13). We have a God who is 'near to the brokenhearted' (Psalm 34:18), who Himself wept (John 11:35), and who promises resurrection and the wiping away of every tear. Faith does not erase grief; it carries us through it toward hope.

Invite reflection: how the student tends to respond to loss, and how they might keep walking with God, and even find hope, in the midst of sorrow, bringing their grief honestly to the God who comforts.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Grief driving us toward God or away from Him.
- Bringing our sorrow to God rather than withdrawing.
- Grieving with hope, not as those without hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13).
- God's nearness to the brokenhearted and the hope of resurrection (Psalm 34:18).

Discussion Prompts

- Do you tend to draw near to God or pull away in grief?
- What would bringing your sorrow honestly to God look like?
- How can you find hope while still grieving?

Question 9

Student Question:

Chapter thirty-six records the generations of Esau, whose nation of Edom flourished quickly with chiefs and kings, while Jacob's promised blessing unfolded slowly through suffering and faith. What does this teach us about God's faithfulness to His word (even to Esau), and about not envying the fast, impressive success of those outside God's covenant path (compare Psalm 73)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal high point, drawn from a chapter we are tempted to skip: the generations of Esau. Two truths emerge. First, God's faithfulness to His word. God had promised that Esau, too, would become a nation (25:23), and chapter thirty-six shows that promise kept: Edom rises with chiefs and kings. God keeps His word even to those outside the covenant line. He is utterly reliable.

Second, a sober and important contrast. Notice the timing. Esau's line flourishes quickly and impressively; Edom has kings 'before any king reigned over the Israelites' (36:31). The descendants of Esau gain power, wealth, and organized nationhood fast, while Jacob's promised blessing unfolds slowly, through grief, waiting, slavery in Egypt, and centuries of struggle, before it bears its true fruit.

Draw out the lesson, which Scripture develops elsewhere. The world's success often comes quicker and looks grander than the covenant path. The wicked and the worldly frequently flourish impressively, while God's people walk a slower, harder road. This can tempt us to envy. Psalm 73 names the struggle exactly: the psalmist 'was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked,' until he 'went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end' (Psalm 73:3, 17).

Teach the right response: do not envy the fast flourishing of those outside God's covenant path. Edom's quick rise was real, but it was not the covenant blessing, and Edom would not be the line of the Messiah. The slower road of promise, through Jacob, through suffering and faith, was the road that led to Christ and to lasting, eternal blessing. What looks slower and harder is often the better way.

Land it for the believer. We are tempted to measure blessing by the world's yardstick, speed, visible success, prosperity, and to feel that the faithful are falling behind. Genesis 36 quietly corrects us. The path of promise may be slow and marked by loss, but it leads to a glory that Edom's kings never knew. 'Do not fret because of evildoers' (Psalm 37:1); trust the long road of promise, which ends in Christ and in an inheritance that does not fade.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's faithfulness to His word, even to Esau, in making Edom a nation (Genesis 25:23; 36).
- The contrast: the world's quick, impressive success versus the slow road of covenant promise.
- The temptation to envy the prosperity of the worldly and the wicked (Psalm 73:3).
- Discerning their 'end' and ours in the presence of God (Psalm 73:17).
- The slow road of promise, through suffering and faith, leading to Christ and lasting blessing.
- Refusing the world's yardstick of speed and visible success for measuring blessing.

Discussion Prompts

- What two things does the genealogy of Esau reveal?

- Why might Edom's quick rise tempt God's people to envy?
- How does Psalm 73 help us respond to the world's fast flourishing?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the whole passage. Name one specific way God is calling you to return to Him, to put away your idols, to walk faithfully through loss, and to trust the slow road of promise rather than envy the world's quick success.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Use this capstone to gather the passage into one resolve. We have seen the call to return to Bethel, the burying of idols, the renewal of the covenant, faith walking through grief, and the warning not to envy the world's fast success. The question is what God is forming in this student.

Press for the specific. For one it is returning to a place of devotion they have left; for another, burying a particular idol; for another, renewing their commitment to God; for another, walking with God through a present grief; for another, releasing envy of the world's prosperity and trusting the slow road of promise.

Close with the God of the long road. The covenant path that ran slowly through Jacob, through grief and waiting, led at last to Christ and to an eternal inheritance. To be formed by this passage is to return to God, bury our idols, renew our devotion, grieve in faith, and trust that the slow road of promise, walked with God, leads to a glory the world's quick success can never give.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Returning to God and burying our idols.
- Renewing our commitment and walking with God through grief.
- Trusting the slow road of promise over the world's quick success.
- The covenant path leading to Christ and an eternal inheritance.

Discussion Prompts

- Which call is God pressing on you: return, burying idols, renewal, or trusting the slow road?
- What idol or drift most needs your decisive action?
- How does the long road of promise, leading to Christ, steady you against envy?