

The Book of Genesis

Lesson 20: Back to Bethel; the Generations of Esau -- Genesis 35:1–36:43

After the horror of Shechem, with his family's name in ruins and danger all around, Jacob hears the voice of God again, and it calls him to go back. "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." Bethel. The place of the ladder, the place of the vow, the place where a frightened runaway first met the God of his fathers. For years Jacob has been everywhere but there, prospering, struggling, settling near Shechem, putting off the promise he made to God twenty years before. Now God says: come home to Me.

And before Jacob goes, he does something that should have happened long ago. He turns to his whole household and says, "Put away the foreign gods that are among you and purify yourselves." There were idols in Jacob's camp, tucked in the baggage, tolerated for years. You cannot worship God at Bethel with other gods in your tent. So they hand them over, and Jacob buries them under a tree, and only then do they journey up to the place of meeting. Renewal always means letting go of the idols we have been carrying.

At Bethel God meets him again and renews everything: the new name Israel, the covenant promises, the assurance that the God Almighty is with him. But the road home is also marked by graves. Faithful old Deborah is buried under an oak. Then, heartbreakingly, Rachel, the wife Jacob loved most, dies giving birth to their last son. With her dying breath she names him Ben-oni, "son of my sorrow," but Jacob renames him Benjamin, "son of my right hand," turning even grief toward hope. And at last old Isaac dies, and Jacob and Esau, the reconciled brothers, stand together once more to bury their father.

Then comes a whole chapter that is easy to skip: the generations of Esau. Lists of chiefs and kings, the rise of the nation of Edom. But it is here for a reason. God had promised Esau would become a nation too, and look, He keeps that word. And there is a quiet warning in it. Esau's line flourishes fast and impressively, with kings and chiefs, while Jacob's promised blessing unfolds slowly, through grief and waiting and faith. The world's success often comes quicker and looks grander than the covenant path. But the line that leads to the Messiah, to real and lasting blessing, runs through the slower road of promise. Read this passage and let it call you home: back to Bethel, away from your idols, faithful through your griefs, unimpressed by the world's fast flourishing, walking the long road of promise with God.

Group Discussion: God called Jacob back to Bethel, the place of his first encounter and his unkept vow, and before going, Jacob had his household put away their foreign gods (35:1–4). Why do you think Jacob had to return to Bethel and get rid of the idols, and what might "returning to Bethel" look like for us?

Personal Reflection: Jacob's family had been quietly carrying idols in their baggage for years before they finally put them away. What "idols" might you be carrying, things that have taken a place in your heart that belongs to God alone? What would it take to bury them and return to wholehearted devotion?

Read Genesis 35:1–36:43

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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)?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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)?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Joshua 24:14–15, putting away the gods and choosing whom you will serve; 1 John 5:21, keeping yourselves from idols; Psalm 73, the prosperity of the wicked and their end, contrasted with nearness to God; Hebrews 12:1–2, laying aside every weight to run the race; Genesis 35:3, the God who answers in the day of distress and is with us wherever we go.