



# COMING HOME

SERIES: *THE LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS*

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Genesis 35:1-29

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Our text deals with one of the greatest difficulties in the Christian life: how do we come home to God after we have drifted from our faith through compromise? Because of the shame involved, it's often harder for the believer than the unbeliever to make that journey. It's one thing for the sinner to turn from darkness and repent and be converted, but think of the difficulty for the believer who reverts to his old ways and leaves a home in a state of wreckage. How can such a man or woman come home? What if others in the family won't forgive, or accept that one's repentance is genuine? Is restoration even possible?

This is exactly the situation in which Jacob finds himself after his compromise to the world around him cost him his daughter, who was raped, the respect of his sons, who hated him, and his witness to the world, as he became a curse rather than a blessing. Last week, our text was all about defilement; this week it is all about purification and grace. Jacob's journey of sixty miles from Shechem to Bethel to Hebron provides a simple yet profound map of the exact steps we need to take to make our journey home to God and one another. The good news is this: no matter where you are today, no matter how much damage and pain you have left in your wake, there is a way home to the Father, who is waiting with open arms.

## I. Coming Home to God (35:1-15)

### A. God's call to come home (35:1)

**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." (Gen 35:1, NASB)**

The text opens with the grace of God. God is the one who makes the call to summon his son home. Notice some things about the call. There are no lengthy counseling sessions. There is no flogging of the saint. There is no attempt to straighten out the messy family relationships. All it takes is just a simple call to get up and go home. God pointedly reminds Jacob of his earlier vow. Back then, at the point of the patriarch's greatest weakness, God had appeared to Jacob and promised to be his God, and Jacob had responded with his vow:

**"If God will be with me and will keep me on this journey that I take, and will give me food to eat and garments to wear, and I return to my father's house in peace, then the Lord will be my God. This stone, which I have set up as a pillar, will be God's house; and all that you give me I will surely give a tenth to You." (Gen 28:20-22)**

God's instructions are simple: "Get up, go home and settle there, and worship God in that place where he found you in weakness." Before any other healing can take place in this family, Jacob must fulfill his earlier vow and come home to God.

How do we hear God's voice calling to us when we've forsaken him in the church? Paul writes in Galatians that we are to be that voice to one another, and that the one who is sensitive to the Spirit should take the initiative to restore a brother or sister who is "caught in any trespass." But with that Paul also gives the admonition that we must be careful to do this as God would do it, "in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted" (Gal 6:1). Restoration is always initiated by the grace and gentleness of God.

Once Jacob hears God's call, like his grandfather Abraham, he responds without delay.

### B. Jacob's journey of obedience (35:2-8)

#### 1. Preparations for the journey (35:2-4)

**So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, "Put away the foreign gods which are among you, and purify yourselves and change your garments; and 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 wherever I have gone." So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods which they had and the rings which were in their ears, and Jacob hid them under the oak which was near Shechem. (35:2-4)**

Jacob's obedience is exemplary. Before he starts his pilgrimage back to Bethel, he reverts to his role of spiritual leader and deals with the idolatry in his home. Before he gets back on "the right way," he has to immediately deal with the issues that took his family off "the way."

The "foreign gods" probably were acquired in Mesopotamia and Canaan. Rachel had stolen her father's household idols (31:19) in a last attempt to strike back at the one who had used her. Imagine the horror now as these gods come out into the open and Jacob remembers his rash vow to Laban, "The one with whom you find your gods shall not live" (31:32).<sup>1</sup> The thought that he might be responsible for Rachel's premature death will haunt him his entire life. His sons too had probably acquired a stash of idols during their looting of Shechem. Jacob wants these idols put away (which has the notion of "as far away as one can get").

Waltke comments: "Repentance entails renouncing whatever hinders or tarnishes worship of God. The covenant's primary requirement is exclusive allegiance to the Lord."<sup>2</sup> Jacob also calls his family to a repentance that involves both internal (idolatry) and external purification (washing and changing of garments), before the journey home is begun. Waltke suggests that this changing of their clothing "symbolizes a new and purified way of life." Jacob's repentance therefore is not just an individual act done in isolation, but a corporate one where he leads by example, memorializing his weakness ("God who answered me in the day of my distress"), and God's faithfulness ("and has been with me wherever I have gone"). The family responds by holding nothing back, not even their earrings that "were often fashioned as figurines of gods and goddesses."<sup>3</sup>

The psalmist may have had this story in mind when he composed Psalm 24 as a model for holy pilgrimage:

Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD?  
And who may stand in His holy place?  
He who has clean hands and a pure heart,  
Who has not lifted up his soul to falsehood  
And has not sworn deceitfully.  
He shall receive a blessing from the LORD  
And righteousness from the God of his salvation.  
This is the generation of those who seek Him,  
Who seek Your face—even Jacob. (Ps 24:3-6)

Collecting all the idols, Jacob buries<sup>4</sup> them under an oak tree,

hoping they would never be used again. In this way he renews his commitment to his God. Brueggemann sums it up well: "Israel must find a way to stay in the land with Canaanites and yet practice faithfulness. The way chosen to do this without either destructiveness or accommodation is by way of radical symbolization. Israel engages in dramatic ritual activity as a mode of faithfulness."<sup>5</sup> For us who also live in an idolatrous culture, it is important to remove the sources where idolatry invades our homes, and then to practice, as Brueggemann suggests, a "radical symbolization" to raise our colors high against the modern Canaanite sky.

Once Jacob has faithfully buried all the idols and led his family in rites of purification, only then does he begin his pilgrimage home to meet with God at Bethel.

## 2. Journey home—grace alongside obedience (35:5-8)

**As they journeyed, there was a great terror [lit. "terror of God"] upon the cities which were around them, and they did not pursue the sons of Jacob. So Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel), which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him. He built an altar there, and called the place El-bethel, because there God had revealed Himself to him when he fled from his brother. (35:5-7)**

Once the family starts south on the road to Bethel they have to face their greatest fear: retaliation from the cities around them. But, amazingly, no army advances upon them. The cities remain strangely silent as they pass by. The narrator explains that a supernatural terror (lit. "terror of God") had fallen on the cities, acting as a shield to protect and guide them safely to their haven. The massacre at Shechem had projected a far different image of this family to the world around than had Israel's original calling as shepherds. Now Israel is feared as a nation of warriors. This supernatural protection would not have been necessary had Jacob remained faithful to fulfill his original vows. How typical of God! Once we take just one step of obedience in the right direction, he responds with more grace than we deserve. This shield of grace escorted Jacob's family all the way home.

Upon arriving in Bethel, Jacob wastes no time completing what he had purposed to do. He builds an altar and renames the place once again, El-Bethel ("God of the House of God"), and retells the story. Now the touchstone of his spirituality, celebrating his weakness and God's grace, is forever etched in stone.

**Now Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died, and she was buried below Bethel under the oak; it was named Allon-bacuth. (35:8)**

At this point the narrator inserts a word about the death, and an obituary of Deborah, Rebekah's nurse. The account, which seems to interrupt the flow of the narrative, raises questions about Rebekah's fate and the absence of any obituary to her. Perhaps we are to view the account through Jacob's eyes. After faithfully fulfilling his vow, he is stabbed by a marker of death that serves to heighten his longing for a mother he will never see. But death does not have the last word. God appears once again to reinstate him by grace.

## C. God's Reinstatement by Grace (35:9-15)

**Then God appeared to Jacob again when he came from Paddan-aram, and He blessed him. 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."  
Then God went up from him in the place where He had spoken with him. (35:9-13)**

Twenty years earlier, on the occasion when Jacob had masqueraded as his brother Esau, Isaac blessed him and said, "May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples. May He also give you the blessing of Abraham, to you and to your descendants with you, that you may possess the land of your sojournings, which God gave to Abraham"(Gen 28:3-4). Now, after two decades of running in fear, that which had been his father's prayer, and the son's dream, is sealed in stone.

And when that long-awaited moment arrives there is no anguish added to it. Jacob's identity as Israel is reaffirmed, and the promises of a seed and land are expanded in language that exceeds all of the earlier promises made to the patriarchs. Jacob's backsliding did not disinherit him. We may be faithless, but God remains faithful. As Wenham observes: "Just as Abraham's three-day pilgrimage to sacrifice on Mount Moriah climaxed in the most categorical reaffirmation of the promises in his career, so, too, Jacob's sacred journey is crowned with the strongest statement of the promises that he ever heard, summing up and adding to what had been said to him on earlier occasions."<sup>6</sup>

With those promises confirmed and sealed on his heart, Jacob now worships.

**Jacob set up a pillar in the place where He had spoken with him, a pillar of stone, and he poured out a drink offering on it; he also poured oil on it. So Jacob named the place where God had spoken with him, Bethel. (34:14-15)**

Just as when God first appeared to him, Jacob sets up another pillar of stone and sanctifies it by pouring oil and a drink offering on it. We are reminded again that this was the anonymous "place" (used three times for emphasis) which God's surprise appearance had transformed into a sacred temple. And in like manner, Jacob here sanctifies an ordinary stone as a reminder of that encounter. The one who had wrestled with stones all his life now worships in stone. God changes our character but sweetly preserves our personality.

Now that Jacob has come home to God, he is prepared to make his second homecoming, this time to his family. We might expect that once the patriarch has led them back to God and is promised a glorious future, he would enjoy a period of uninterrupted peace and harmony as he makes his journey from Bethel to Hebron—especially after God had supernaturally shielded him from attack. But unfortunately, the road home is filled with unspeakable sorrow for Jacob.

## II. Coming Home to Family (35:16-29)

### A. The death of a wife (35:16-21)

**Then they journeyed from Bethel; and when there was still some distance to go to Ephrath, Rachel began to give birth and she suffered severe labor. When she was in severe labor the midwife said to her, "Do not fear, for now you have another son." It came about as her soul was departing (for she died), that she named him Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin. So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem). Jacob set up a pillar over her grave; that is the pillar of Rachel's grave to this day. Then Israel journeyed on and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder. (35:16-21)**

Had I been in Jacob's shoes, my sins forgiven and God's blessing firmly attached to my loins, I couldn't wait to come to my parents' home and finally introduce them to my new wife and children, and share all that God had done for me over the past twenty years. I wonder what Jacob anticipated on that thirty-mile journey from Bethel to Hebron. Heading south on the road to Bethlehem, about four and a half miles out<sup>7</sup> from the city, Rachel

went into labor. Her pregnancy had been an answer to her prayer at Joseph's birth that God would *add (yasaph)* to her another son. Perhaps the hardship of the journey set off the labor. But, worse still, it was more severe than she could bear. While her midwife rejoices that God is answering her prayer, Rachel knows she is dying. With her last breath she names the boy Ben-oni, "the son of my affliction."

So life, which had greeted Jacob with a smile, turns and bites him, taking the wife of his youth and love of his life. Unable to bear the thought of being reminded of his wife's death with every mention of the name she gave to her son, he quickly changes Ben-oni to Benjamin, "son of my right hand," hoping that the destiny of the favored son (the right hand being symbolic of one's dexterity) might transform the sorrow that attached to his birth into joy. Rachel never made it home to meet her husband's parents.

So for Jacob, and for us, too, death occurs in the midst of life. Once when I was a young pastor at PBC, the wife of one of my colleagues was about to give birth. At the time they had a two and half year-old son. While the boy was on an outing, he choked on an almond that became lodged beneath his vocal cords. As they rushed him to the hospital his mother went into labor, unaware whether he was going to live. She delivered a beautiful girl on the same day that she lost her son. They would forever celebrate their daughter's birthday with mixed emotions.

Following Rachel's death, another memorial stone is eternally raised in Jacob's life, this time in memory of the woman he had loved so deeply but seemed unable to completely embrace. Their courtship was marred by deception, their marriage by competition, their love life by barrenness, and finally, their parenthood by death. So deep was Rachel's pain that Jeremiah could not help reawakening her tears as he searched for the appropriate metaphor to give voice to Israel's pain during the exile:

Thus says the LORD,

"A voice is heard in Ramah,  
Lamentation and bitter weeping.  
Rachel is weeping for her children;  
She refuses to be comforted for her children,  
Because they are no more." (Jer 31:15)

If the loss of his wife wasn't bad enough, it gets even worse for the patriarch.

#### **B. Hatred from a son (35:22)**

**It came about while Israel was dwelling in that land, that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine, and Israel heard of it. (35:22)**

With the family finally settled and the mantle of leadership ready to be passed onto the next generation, Jacob's eldest commits incest with Rachel's maid, Bilhah. So deep is Reuben's resentment over his father's lack of response to Dinah's rape, he lashes out in rage. His illicit sex is more a question about family leadership than lust. "By defiling Bilhah, he makes certain that with Rachel's death her handmaid cannot supplant Leah as chief wife (cf. 2 Sam. 15:16; 16:22; 20:33)...Moreover, according to known ancient Near Eastern cultural forms, by taking his father's concubine Reuben is attempting to seize Jacob's leadership (cf. 2 Sam. 3:7-8; 12:7-8; 16:21-22; 1 Kings 2:13-25)."<sup>8</sup> Reuben is shaming his father in the most despicable way, in essence attempting to force him "out of office."

In response to such a disgraceful act the text records that "Israel heard" but did nothing—at least not yet. Later he will censure Reuben, whose unrepentant sexual sin disqualified him from his first-born privilege of leading the nation.

"Reuben, you are my first-born;  
My might and the beginning of my strength,  
Preeminent in dignity and preeminent in power.  
Uncontrolled as water, you shall not have preeminence,

Because you went up to your father's bed;  
Then you defiled it—he went up to my couch." (Gen 49:3-4)

So Jacob comes home engulfed in sorrow: his daughter raped, the love of his life dead, several sons alienated, and a firstborn who has disowned and disgraced him. As all these emotions war inside the patriarch, what kind of reception awaits him. How will Rebekah receive him? Will one glimpse of her favorite son be like life from the dead to her? What will his father say to him? Will he embrace him with tears, as did Esau, or treat him with polite resignation, crowning decades of indifference? If ever Jacob was in need of a father's touch it was now. The anticipation builds and builds, yet what follows is one of the greatest letdowns in the Bible.

#### **C. Silence from a father (35:27-29)**

**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. (35:27-29)**

We must remember that everything in Jacob's story over the last seven chapters of these texts has been building to this one climactic moment—the reunion of a father and son. But the very thing that Jacob, now scorched with longing, desires to hear, the narrator withholds. No words are recorded as having passed between father and son. Even worse, there is no mention of Rebekah, so we must assume that she died. But where is her obituary? We have her nurse's obituary, but where is hers? The silence screams, and the story closes with a whimper. All we are left with is a three-line clipping from Isaac's obituary, saying that Isaac died, blessed with a "ripe age" (in contrast to Abraham, who died "full of years and satisfied with life," 25:8). But the text is void of any words of faith, tears, or emotions. All we have is but the image of two former enemies now united as brothers at their father's funeral.

What are we to take away from this homecoming? Let me suggest that in order to understand its implications we must view it in the larger context of Jacob's two journeys, the first to God in Bethel, the second to Hebron to his family. Taken together, these two journeys give a paradigm not just for the way of repentance (to Bethel), but the expectations that we ought to have following repentance (to Hebron).

### **Reflections On Coming Home to God**

#### **1. God initiates the call home by grace**

The good news is that God doesn't always wait for us to call home. He is the one who picks up the phone and makes the call. No matter what we have done, no matter what wreckage we have left behind in relationships, he is always eager for us to come home. And he prods us to come home not through guilt, but through the memory of our new identity. Just as firmly as he said to Jacob, "No longer shall you be Jacob. You are now to be Israel," so too he says of us, "You are not an alcoholic, or idolater, or an adulterer, but a precious son or daughter in Christ. Come home!"

#### **2. Repentance precedes the journey**

Once we hear the call to come home we need not wallow in self-pity or flog ourselves with guilt. What is required is the simple but responsible action of trashing the idols that got us off course. For Jacob, this involved a permanent removal of the presence of the idols they had accumulated in their journeys. They were simply collected, then buried. Later leaders in Israel burned them. Once the idols have been "put off," the family cleanses itself and changes its garments in a public demonstration to the world that they are starting a new life down a new road. Only then do they make their way to the house of worship.

The same holds true today. The fruit that demonstrates genuine repentance is taking drastic action with the idols that got us off course in the first place. For the alcoholic that means pouring out all the alcohol; for those in debt, cutting up the credit cards; for the adulterer, giving up the affair; for the lustful, trashing the sources of pornography; for the irresponsible, paying bills; and for all, stepping away from the environments that feed our sensual appetites.

### 3. Allow God to reinstate you

Once Jacob has come home, God not only welcomes him, he reinstates him with a greater future than originally promised. The promises become fuller, richer and more concrete than those made to any patriarch. Likewise, when we have drifted from the faith and want to come home, we don't need to plead our case before others. What we must do is be quiet and listen to the word of God and allow him to restore us in his way, in his time.

### 4. Worship in community

Once God has personally reinstated Jacob, worship is restored to the center of the patriarch's life. He does not worship isolated by his past shame, but in community, making his weakness public for all to see. By raising a massive stone pillar and sanctifying it he is forever memorializing Bethel as the place where God saved him at his weakest. Coming home to God might mean staying at the center of public worship and giving full confession to your weakness. One might even suggest you might erect concrete reminders of God's faithfulness.

### 5. A word to the onlookers

Don't flog the prodigals; welcome them with open hearts. The only requirement for coming home to worship is confession of sin and removal of idols. A mountain of wreckage in relationships might still remain to be sorted through, but that will be God's business, accomplished in his time. Our part is to reflect the joy of the waiting Father that the wandering sheep is now home. And great reward is due to those who searched for them and brought them home (Jas 5:19-20).

But notice, that is only half of Jacob's journey. Now that he is home with God, he still has to make that thirty-mile journey to his family in Hebron. And while on the first half of the journey he was supernaturally shielded from destruction, during the second half he is not shielded from terrible sorrow. Perhaps this might suggest the expectations we ought to have during the process of restoration.

### 6. Absorb the pain from others

God will forgive you for your sins, but your own family may not. The damage done may be too great for them to offer the gift of forgiveness. In fact, their retaliation may be worse than your original sin (as it was with Reuben). But if others lash out, don't fight back. The sorrow will be good for you. Remember David's example in response to the cruel curses and stones of Shimei during Absalom's rebellion:

Thus Shimei said when he cursed, "Get out, get out, you man of bloodshed, and worthless fellow! The LORD has returned upon you all the bloodshed of the house of Saul, in whose place you have reigned; and the LORD has given the kingdom into the hand of your son Absalom. And behold, you are taken in your own evil, for you are a man of bloodshed!"... Then David said to Abishai and to all his servants, "Behold, my son who came out from me seeks my life; how much more now this Benjamite? Let him alone and let him curse, for the LORD has told him. Perhaps the LORD will look on my affliction and return good to me instead of his cursing this day." (2 Sam 16:7-12)

So if others refuse to accept you, don't fight back. Take the hits and allow God to vindicate you. To quote George MacDonald's beautiful prayer, "O God, make me into a rock which swallows up the waves of wrong in its great caverns and never throws them back to swell the commotion of the angry sea from whence they came. Ah! To annihilate wrong in this way—to say, 'It shall not be wrong against me, so utterly do I forgive it!'"

### 7. Remember whose son you really are

So why does the narrator seemingly let us down with this, perhaps the greatest anti-climax in the Bible? Why is it that Jacob's father fails to meet even one of his son's expectations? Why does God close the book on this patriarch without one word of acceptance or even recognition for his son? The silence does two things. First, it reminds Jacob of whose son he really is, and that his true home is now Bethel, not Hebron. Once we have been adopted as a son or daughter into God's family, old family ties are to fade away, to the point where there is no need of blessing (Mark 3:33-35). Second, the pain of silence serves to remind Jacob of his failure toward his daughter. So the silence serves two purposes: it makes Jacob a more secure son and a more compassionate father.

### 8. Pillars of pain become gateways of hope

There is a lot of pain in this seemingly short journey of thirty miles, but our perspective is much larger than that granted to Jacob. Two stone pillars are erected in the story: one in Bethel, where God spoke to him, the other near Bethlehem, where child-birth took the wife he loved. We will never know how many tears Jacob shed over that pillar in Bethlehem, and yet it is Bethlehem, not Bethel, that gives shape to salvation history and becomes the doorway of hope for the universe. The place of Jacob's mourning becomes the birthplace of the Messiah, a birth that dried Rachel's tears. Remember this: your greatest earthly losses cannot be compared to the eternal weight of glory being prepared for you. So weep with your eyes open, for these losses are the touchstone to the future.

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1. See Gordon Tucker's fascinating article, "Jacob's Terrible Burden—In the Shadow of the Text," *Bible Review* 10:3 (June 1994), 20-28.

2. Bruce Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 472.

3. Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: Norton, 1996), 196.

4. "buried them" - "The rare Hebrew term...may signify that they were buried ignominiously (i.e. 'dumped'). This is a unique procedure. Later leaders burned them (Ex. 32:30; Deut. 9:21; 1 Kings 15:13; 1 Chron. 14:12)." Waltke, *Genesis*, 472-473.

5. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 281.

6. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (Dallas: Word, 1994), 325.

7. Alter, *Genesis*, 198, suggests that this expression (*kivrat ha'arets* - "some distance") is "the royal measure of distance...the equivalent of about four and half English miles."

8. Waltke, *Genesis*, 478.