

JACOB RETURNS TO BETHEL

Genesis 33:12-35:29 (36)
(46:1-47:10; 48:1-50:14)
Key Verse: 35:3

Lesson 14b

"Then come, let us go up to Bethel, where I will build an altar to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and who has been with me wherever I have gone."

1. Jacob settles near Shechem (33:12-34:31)

Jacob had struggled with God and become Israel. He no longer wanted to fight with men in the fierce jungle of worldly competition. He had peace in his heart, and he wanted to settle down and enjoy the blessings God had given him. When Esau offered to accompany him back to his father's house, Jacob declined his offer. He was not eager to spend time in Esau's company; it was enough that he had "found favor in the eyes of my lord." (15) So Jacob moved on slowly to a place near the city of Shechem. He camped within sight of the city; then, he bought the land on which he camped from Hamor, the ruler of Shechem. He built an altar there and called it "God, the God of Israel." He named his own small village "Succoth", which means "shelters."

He planned to settle down there in Succoth. He had God's peace in his heart--perhaps for the first time in his life. He suddenly became tired of wandering and tired of struggling with men. He would worship God and enjoy God's blessings--his family and his wealth,-- and make friends with the Shechemites. He forgot about his holy pilgrimage and the calling God had given him to be a patriarch of faith and a blessing to all people. He forgot about the blessing of Abraham and his inheritance in Canaan; he forgot about his own promise to return to his father's house and worship God at Bethel. He took God's blessings with a firm hold, but he only wanted to use them for himself.

Jacob had wanted to live peacefully in his father's tent, enjoying his mother's love, but because of Esau, he had to leave home. He had wanted to stay in Paddan Aram and enjoy his family and his wealth, but because of the envy of Laban and his sons, he had to leave. Now, he had the greatest blessing, the blessing of God's peace. He wanted to settle down and become an ordinary man. Many people become nominal Christians because they receive God's blessings and want to sit down and enjoy their peaceful, blessed lives. However, God blesses us so that we can be a blessing to others. He calls us into his redemptive history so that he can use us in his great task of evangelizing the world in our time. He wants us to remember our promises and keep them. We must travel the pilgrim road by faith from first to last, until we reach our destination and claim the inheritance God is keeping for us in heaven. God worked in Jacob's life to keep him traveling on his life of pilgrimage.

God did not bless him at Succoth. Something happened that made it impossible for him to remain there. Chapter 34 tells the story of the tragic involvement of Dinah, Jacob's only daughter, with Prince Shechem, the son of Hamor, ruler of the city of Shechem. Verses 1-3 say, "Now Dinah, the daughter Leah had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the women of the land. When Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, the ruler of that area, saw her, he took her and violated her. His heart was drawn to Dinah daughter of Jacob, and he loved the girl and spoke tenderly to her." He asked his father, "Get me this girl as my wife." Jacob might have been willing to work out something with Hamor, because Prince Shechem loved his daughter--and it was probably mutual. Furthermore, to have a firm treaty with Hamor and the Shechemites would fit in with his plan to settle down in Succoth. But his sons, Simeon and Levi, were incensed that their sister should be treated like a prostitute. They didn't care whether Dinah liked Prince Shechem or not. "They were filled with grief and fury, because Shechem had done a disgraceful thing in Israel by lying with Jacob's daughter--a thing that should not be done." (7) But they themselves did something which should not be done. Simeon and Levi tricked the men of Shechem by pretending to agree to make a treaty with them--on the condition that they be circumcised. The Shechemites liked and respected Prince Shechem, so they agreed. But as soon as they had done it, while they were sore from the circumcision, Simeon and Levi attacked and looted the city, putting all the men to the sword.

Jacob rebuked his sons. They had made him a stench to the Canaanites and Perizzites who lived in the land; now he had to leave. Jacob never forgot this event. Just before his death, Jacob blessed all his sons with blessings that were appropriate to them. At that time, he remembered this event, and he withheld blessing from Simeon and Levi because of their violence and cruelty. (49:5-7).

It was not pleasing to God for Jacob to make a treaty with the people of the land and intermarry with them. Had he done this, he would have compromised his faith and lost the covenant blessing. So God used this tragedy to push him to complete his journey back to Bethel.

2. Jacob returns to Bethel (35:1-28)

God came to Jacob when he was in danger of being annihilated by the people of the land. He said, "Go up to Bethel and settle there, and build an altar there to God who appeared to you when you were fleeing from your brother Esau." God reminded Jacob of his vow. He reminded him of his protection. Jacob accepted God's word and repented--for the first time. He ordered his household to get rid of the foreign gods and purify themselves. He said, "Let us go up to Bethel, where I will build an altar to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and who has been with me wherever I have gone." He remembered God's grace. When he set out for Bethel, the terror of God fell on the people of the land and no one pursued him. God's hand of protection was on him.

Jacob arrived in Bethel and God again appeared to him and blessed him. God said, "Your name is Jacob, but you will no longer be called Jacob; your name will be Israel." God renewed the covenant promises which he had made to

Abraham. God talked with Jacob personally there, and Jacob set up a stone pillar there at Bethel. He remembered this personal meeting with God in this place where he had first met God and made a vow. God held on to that vow and for 20 years he had been with Jacob to bless him and train him and bring him back to that place. But he was not the Jacob who left; he had become a new man. He had become Israel, a man who struggles with God. His life and faith had been self-centered. Now he worshipped the God of Bethel--El Bethel. He had become a God-centered man.

3. Jacob's later life (46:1-47:10; 48:1-50:14)

Jacob's later life, however, was full of sorrow. His beloved Rachel died giving birth to her second son, Benjamin. Her son, Joseph, whom Jacob loved more than all the rest of his sons, was sold by his jealous brothers into slavery in Egypt. For 20 years Jacob thought his son was dead, and he did not stop mourning for him during all that time. Later, Canaan became barren because of a famine, and Jacob's whole family was in trouble. But God's hand was leading Jacob and his family to prepare them for a larger purpose. Because of Joseph, Jacob and all his family moved to Egypt. Egypt became the dark womb in which the people of Israel grew in number until, after 400 years, the nation of Israel could be born through the Exodus.

Jacob lived out his last days in peace. Instead of living as a man of struggle, he lived as a man of blessing. He blessed Pharaoh (47:10); he blessed Joseph's sons (48); he blessed his own sons (49). He said of his life, "My years have been few and difficult, and they do not equal the years of the pilgrimage of my fathers." (47:9) As Jacob neared the end of his life, he confessed, "God has been my shepherd all the days of my life." (48:15) God indeed was Jacob's shepherd. He led him and trained him until Jacob the deceiver, the man who struggled with men and won, could become Israel, the patriarch of faith, the man who talked with God.

The death of Rachel while giving birth to Benjamin, the sin of Jacob's eldest son, Reuben and the death of Isaac are historical footnotes recorded in the last part of chapter 35. Chapter 36 is a genealogical record of Esau's descendants. Genealogies frequently are used as literary devices to divide the book of Genesis into sections. The focal point of God's history shifts from Jacob to Jacob's sons, and the remainder of Genesis tells the story of how God worked to change these ungodly men into patriarchs of faith and pillars of the new nation which God was creating.