

Genesis 35

As we look at the life of Jacob, we see a man who is very much like us. He's had his mountain-top experiences, and he's had his valleys. In the previous chapter, things were a mess. His family was in disarray, there was sin in the camp, and Jacob was gripped by fear. He was looking at the circumstances around him—the threat of the Canaanites—and he was terrified.

Isn't it interesting how fear has a way of refocusing our attention? Sometimes God allows the pressure to mount just so we'll look up.

The Call to Return

In Genesis 35:1, God speaks to Jacob: "Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there; and make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from the face of Esau your brother."

God tells him, "Jacob, go back to Bethel." Bethel means "the House of God." It was the place of his first real encounter with the Lord. It was the place of his first love.

There are times in our lives when we've allowed "strange gods" to creep in. Maybe it's not a little wooden statue on a shelf, but it's a career, a hobby, or a relationship that has taken the throne of your heart. When we settle down in the world—like Jacob did near Shechem—we start to look like the world. Our devotion gets diluted.

A Spiritual Housecleaning

Notice Jacob's response in Genesis 35:2: "Put away the foreign gods that are among you, purify yourselves, and change your garments." He didn't just pray about it; he took action. He called for a spiritual housecleaning. They took those idols and those earrings—which were often associated with pagan superstitions—and they buried them under the terebinth tree.

If you want to move forward with God, you've got to bury the past. You can't bring the baggage of Shechem into the blessings of Bethel. We need that "renewal of our dedication," as we see here. We need to "change our garments"—putting off the old man and putting on the new.

The Faithfulness of God

As they journeyed, the Bible says the terror of God fell upon the surrounding cities. When Jacob took care of the internal spiritual issues, God took care of the external physical threats.

Jacob arrives at Bethel, builds an altar, and God meets him there again. God reaffirms his name: "Your name shall not be called Jacob anymore, but Israel shall be your name" (Genesis 35:10). Jacob means "heel-catcher" or "supplanter," but Israel means "Governed by God."

God is essentially saying, "I'm not done with you yet. I'm still the God of the covenant." He reveals Himself as El Shaddai—God Almighty. He is the all-sufficient One. Whatever you are facing today, He is enough.

Bittersweet Realities

The chapter takes a somber turn as they journey toward Ephrath, which is Bethlehem. Rachel, the wife Jacob loved so dearly, goes into hard labor. As her soul was departing, she named the baby Ben-Oni, "Son of my Sorrow."

But look at the grace of the father. Jacob reaches down and says, "No, his name shall be Benjamin"—the "Son of my Right Hand."

What a beautiful picture of what God does for us. We were all children of sorrow, born into sin and death. But because of what Jesus did, we are brought to the place of the "right hand" of the Father.

We also see the death of Isaac at 180 years old. It's a reminder that our time here is a vapor. Isaac's life was a mix of quiet faith and some stumbles, but he was "gathered to his people."

Practical Application for the Believer

Are you dwelling in Shechem today, or are you in Bethel?

- Examine your tent: Is there anything in your life—an "earring" or a "strange god"—that is robbing God of His glory?
- Return to the first things: If you've lost that "first love" thrill, go back to the place where you first met Him. Spend time in the Word and in prayer today, not as a chore, but as a meeting with the Living God.
- Trust the Father's Name: You might feel like a "Son of Sorrow" today, but in Christ, you are a child of the King.

A Challenge to Believers

I challenge you this week: Don't just "tolerate" the idols in your home or your heart. Bury them. Make a clean break. Arise and go up to Bethel. Let your life be governed by God—be an "Israel"—rather than a "Jacob" trying to scheme your way through life.

An Invitation to New Life

Perhaps you're reading this and you realize you've never truly met the God of Bethel. You've been running, trying to fill that void with "strange gods" that never satisfy.

The Bible tells us that we have all sinned and fallen short. But God, in His incredible love, sent His Son, Jesus. He went to a cross and shed His precious blood to pay the price for every wrong thing you've ever done. He died in your place.

But He didn't stay in that grave! His resurrection declares that He is God, Savior, and Lord. He is alive today, and He is calling you. He's saying, "Arise, come to Me."

If you want to start over, if you want your sins forgiven and the hope of heaven, simply turn to Him right now. Repent of your sins and receive Him as your Lord. He will give you a new name and a new future.