

**Recognizing Idols and Repenting of Them (Genesis 35:1-15)**  
*Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at GCBC on January 12, 2014*

When I was 6 or 7 years old, I remember a few things vividly from a church we were at in the Philippines. I'm glad we have children with us in church here and I want you kids to picture this with me. At the end of this service, we'll be welcoming some new members in the front of this church who are committing to Christ and to this local church. I want you to imagine what I saw when I was a kid the same age as some of you. At the end of a Sunday service a Filipino family came to the front. They explained they wanted to repent of all their idols in front of the church and they wanted to get rid of all their idols publically. I'll admit there were times I was bored in church growing up, but this wasn't one of them. I never forgot what happened next.

They didn't just say a few things to the pastor and church about committing to the church as members, they didn't just give their testimony (as some of our new members will give their testimony tonight, Jim and Karen). On this Sunday, they made an even bigger statement. They brought their idols to the front of the church, statues they used to pray to and worship, and I think the deacons came forward with hammers. The family showed their repentance by asking deacons to smash these idols into pieces in front of the church. It was awesome! My jaw dropped! Jeff did you know this is what deacons do?

When the people of Ephesus repented of their pagan practices they actually had a big bonfire where they burned everything from their old false religion (Acts 19:19). Biblical repentance isn't just saying I'm sorry for my sin, it's a turning from sin, a change of mind that becomes a change in life, a change of direction. I forsake my sin, want to be finished with it, free from it. If we truly repent we're willing to do whatever it takes to cut it out, to get rid of it, to smash or burn or destroy whatever keeps us from true worship. We know if we don't destroy that sin from our homes, that sin may destroy our homes ... this is where Jacob finds himself in Genesis 35, if you would turn there.

Some of you in your testimony can think of things you knew you had to get out of your life, that you threw away or destroyed or flushed down a toilet. The things we worship and live for may not be statues; they're whatever is in the place of God in our life, who/what we live for. We need to recognize our idols and repent of them. Knowing our idols and how to repent of them is something that can change your life and should. This was a life-changing event in Jacob's life and the Holy Spirit doesn't want our lives unchanged as we come to His Word that He inspired for our teaching, for our rebuke, for our correction, and for our training in righteousness, as 2 Tim 3:16 says.

If you would please give your attention to Gen 35, God is about to speak:

*Genesis 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." <sup>2</sup> 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; <sup>3</sup> 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." <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> As they journeyed, there was a great terror upon the cities which were around them, and they did not pursue the sons of Jacob. <sup>6</sup> So Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel), which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him. <sup>7</sup> He built an altar there, and called the place*

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*El-bethel, because there God had revealed Himself to him when he fled from his brother. <sup>8</sup> Now Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died, and she was buried below Bethel under the oak; it was named Allon-bacuth. <sup>9</sup> Then God appeared to Jacob again when he came from Paddan-aram, and He blessed him. <sup>10</sup> 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.*

In chapter 34, for the first time there's a whole chapter without God's name. But Gen 35 begins with God, 2 times in v. 1. God by name appears 11x in Gen 35 in English, another 11x in Hebrew ("El," El Shaddai, Beth-el, etc.).

Donald Grey Barnhouse: 'Chapter 34 does not mention God, and is full of lust, murder, deceit, and wretchedness – but this chapter [35] is filled with God ... The contrast is striking, as it always must be in the life of a believer living out of the will of God, and again when he returns to the will of God.'<sup>i</sup>

Another says: 'God is written large all over this culminating chapter that records Jacob's repentance...God's grace triumphs amidst sin's residuals'<sup>ii</sup>

2 weeks ago I talked about application and how to hear God speak after the sermon and I gave you an acronym of application questions that work for our outline today. I know that was a long time ago, but anyone remember what S stood for in the acronym S.P.E.A.K.? Ask yourself if there's some...

**S?** - Sin to repent of? (This is where Jacob starts in v. 1-2)

**P?** - Promise to thank God for? (v. 3 mentions God's promised presence)

**E?** - Example to follow or avoid? (We'll see this family's example in v. 4-6)

**A?** - Attitude I need to change? (We'll see Jacob's change in v. 7-15)

**K?** - Knowledge to apply or study further? (Ex: subject of idols of the heart)

Jacob hears God speak in v. 1 and he applies what God says and we need to hear God speak in this text as we ask ourselves these application questions.

**First, is there a Sin to repent of?**

Look at v. 1 *Then God said to Jacob, "Arise, go up to Bethel and live there ...*

We need to back in context to see what Jacob's sin was he need to repent of.

If you go back to chapter 31 God told Jacob in Paddan-aram (modern Syria, about 450 miles away) to go to the Promised Land and a specific part of it: **31:3** *Then the LORD said to Jacob, "Return to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you."* [v. 13 is even more specific]: <sup>13</sup> *'I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar, where you made a vow to Me; now arise, leave this land, and return to the land of your birth.'* "

God wanted Jacob to go back to the specific place in Bethel where he made a vow and had anointed a pillar, and then to return to his family in the land where he was born. Now look at Gen 32:9 where he prays: <sup>9</sup> *Jacob said, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD, who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your relatives, and I will prosper you ...* But in Gen 33:18 Jacob doesn't go all the way. Look at **33:18**: *Now Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem [20 miles short of Bethel], which is in the land of Canaan, when he came from*

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*Paddan-aram, and camped before the city.* <sup>19</sup> *He bought the piece of land where he had pitched his tent from the hand of the sons of Hamor, Shechem's father, for one hundred pieces of money.* <sup>20</sup> *Then he erected there an altar and called it El-Elohe-Israel.* [This isn't where God told him to go but Jacob is buying land, he's settling] **34:1** *Now Dinah the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the daughters of the land.* <sup>2</sup> *When Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite, the prince of the land, saw her, he took her and lay with her by force ...* Because Jacob didn't fully obey God, disaster comes on his family in this chapter. If he had gone one more day's journey to Bethel, this sad chapter wouldn't be in our Bible. And v. 1 makes us wonder why Jacob lets his girl go out alone without a chaperone or companion or brother to protect her in a land known for its immorality. We don't know what's going on in Dinah's teenage heart, but v. 1 suggests she was drawn to the girls of her world and wanted to go out to them. But there's great danger in that, as the world isn't a safe place. We can't trust the world, and we can't trust our hearts either. Don't be deceived, bad company corrupts (1 Cor 15:33). Dinah isn't responsible for Shechem's sin, but Jacob is responsible as her father to protect his girl, and not to give in to her desires for the world. It's dangerous in our immoral world today, too, to let young teens go, do, see what they want or to have unmonitored access to the world, its media, the internet, etc.

In Gen 33:18 it says Jacob initially just "camped near the city." Maybe his plan wasn't to stay as long as he did, but in v. 19 the place where he pitched his tent he later decides to buy. Go back to chapter 13 where that reminds us of earlier in Genesis. With Lot there's a similar progression (or digression).

**13:12** *Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled in the cities of the valley, and moved his tents as far as Sodom.* [NIV 'near'; KJV 'pitched his tent toward Sodom'] <sup>13</sup> *Now the men of Sodom were wicked exceedingly and sinners against the LORD ...* [**14:12** says enemies] ... *took Lot, Abram's nephew, and his possessions and departed, for he was living in Sodom.*

Now go to chapter 19 where we see even after enemies captured him, Lot is back in Sodom and even more integrated. **19:1** *Now the two angels came to Sodom in the evening as Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom.* This phrase for "sitting in the gate of" a city meant he's a full member of the men, he's doing business with them—that's the same bad path Jacob is on in Shechem. [It was disastrous for Lot's daughters also in the end, in immorality]. Back in Gen 35 rebukes another believer's compromise with the world, in a desire probably for the same thing (bigger city, more opportunities, work?). We have to ask where we're too cozy with or compromised with our world?

In Gen 19 God sent angels with a message to Lot to get out of there. In Gen 35 God Himself delivers the message. Look at **35:1** *Then God said to Jacob "Arise, go up to Bethel and live there, and make an altar there to God ..."*

There's a note of hope here to us parents who fail in our responsibility, even though our sin has consequences in our family, if we take responsibility for our sin like in v. 2, and we seek to lead our family toward repentance, there is grace. Jacob calls for a house-cleaning in v. 2 of idols (more on that later) then he adds in v. 2: "... and purify yourselves and change your garments; <sup>3</sup> and let us arise and go up to Bethel, and I will make an altar there to God..."

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We need to be purified of our sin to worship rightly. Ps 24:3 (NKJV) says:

*Who may ascend to the hill of LORD ... His holy place? <sup>4</sup> He who has **clean hands and a pure heart**, Who has not lifted up his soul to an idol, Nor sworn deceitfully [unlike Jacob's family in Gen 34 who needed purified hearts; to cleanse their hands of blood on their hands (34:25); to purge idols taken from the pagans (34:29), to repent of swearing deceitfully (34:13-16)] <sup>5</sup> He shall receive blessing from the LORD, And righteousness from the God of his salvation. <sup>6</sup> **This is Jacob, the generation of those who seek Him** ... In Gen 35 the next generation of Jacob is purified, seeking God in repentant faith. Our generation needs to ask is there sin I need to repent/be purified of ... **#2. Is there a Promise I need to trust?***

In v. 3 I think Jacob is able to do this because he's trusting God's promise to be with Him. Look at v. 3 again at what he says to his family "*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.*"

If you back to chapter 28 you can read God promised that to him at Bethel. 28:12 is Jacob's ladder/stairway vision, v. 15 is God's promise: "*Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.*" ... [in v. 18 Jacob sets up a sacred stone and names the place Bethel in v. 19] <sup>20</sup> *Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "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, <sup>21</sup> and I return to my father's house in safety, then the LORD will be my God. <sup>22</sup> "This stone, which I have set up as a pillar, will be God's house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You."*

God kept His promise to this man and God is now reminding Jacob to keep his promise to God to come back to Bethel and to his father's house and to worship at the house of God, to tithe of all God gave and to truly trust God. We have this same promise of God's presence and provision we must trust.

*Is there a promise I need to trust or ... #3. An Example I need to follow?*

In v. 4 it says they took their false gods and earrings and buried them. Does this mean you must get rid of earrings? In context of v. 2 ('put away idols') the earrings they put away in v. 4 must have been associated with idols. In Canannite archaeology jewelry had pagan symbols, ex: shape of a crescent for the moon god. Others were amulets and good luck charms.<sup>iii</sup> Gen 34 says they took everything in Shechem's houses (must include idolatrous jewelry)

Turn to Joshua 24 to see how this example was followed in this very place. What Jacob's family did here their later descendants needed to also reaffirm. Joshua 24:1 *Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem [same place as Gen 35], and called for the elders of Israel and for their heads and their judges and their officers; and they presented themselves before God. ...<sup>14</sup> "Now, therefore, fear the LORD and serve Him in sincerity and truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served ... [v. 15 is the key verse] "If it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."*

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[in v. 21 they reply] *The people said to Joshua, "No, but **we will** serve the LORD."* <sup>22</sup> *Joshua said to the people, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen for yourselves the LORD, to serve Him." And they said, "We are witnesses."* <sup>23</sup> *"Now therefore, **put away the foreign gods which are in your midst, and incline your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.**"* <sup>24</sup> *The people said to Joshua, "**We will** serve the LORD our God and we will obey His voice."* <sup>25</sup> *So Joshua made **a covenant with the people** that day, and made for them a statute and an ordinance **in Shechem.*** <sup>26</sup> *And Joshua **wrote these words** in the book of the law of God; and he took a large stone and set it up there under the oak that was by the sanctuary of the LORD.*

In Shechem, maybe at the very same oak tree Jacob's sons buried their gods under, the next generation committed to the faith of their father, and weren't ashamed for it to be written down. A covenant was made expressing all this publically before witnesses. Some of God's people today question whether it's biblical to ask believers to express membership commitments verbally before witnesses, or to sign/write down or have a covenant. Friends, the first book of the Bible forward has God's people making vows to serve in God's house (Jacob in Gen 28 and Moses called all God's people to verbally affirm their covenant and commitment to the Lord in the end of Deuteronomy, and here in Joshua 24 they're called to reaffirm it, v. 26 says by their sanctuary).

In our sanctuary at the end of this service today new members will express vows or commitments like in v. 24 saying in response to a leader "we will." Not every church does it the same way, I see membership as affirming v. 15 like Joshua saying to all *as for me and my house we will serve the Lord here* (it's committing to leadership, accountability, and the covenant community)

Some here may need to consider the example of Israel and the commitment to God and His house, in contrast to our world's anti-commitment ideology. If we can move from God's house to our house, we may need to think about the example of getting rid of pagan things in our homes. I was convicted by this many years ago when I was in seminary of things in my home I needed to get rid of, not just R-rated movies but some PG-13 movies that needed to go for the sake of my walk and witness. I can think back to when I was in college and some of the music tapes I had needed to go in the trash because they were just bad. For you, there may be other things in your life to toss out

v. 24 calls us to not only put away the false, but to incline our hearts to God. Whatever draws our heart away from God we must be willing to get rid of. Back in Gen 35, as Jacob's family got rid of the pagan things of their world in v. 4, God was with them in v. 5 as they came to Bethel in v. 6 ("the house of God" is what that name means). May we follow Israel's example coming to the house of God more this year, and to worship with more cleansed lives

A 4th question to help us: **Is there an Attitude I need to change?**

In Gen 35:7 I think there's a change in Jacob's attitude toward this place, as it says when he worships there at the altar he re-named it "El-bethel." Bethel =house of God (*Beth*=house, *El*=God). El-bethel=the God of the house of God. Jacob's attitude and focus has changed from the place to the person. It may be for us we focus more on physical things in worship, the atmosphere, the place, our preferences. But church is about a person, God, not about us.

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Jacob was changed as he encountered God in worship in v. 10 and his name is changed from Jacob to Israel (*Jacob*=heel grabber, cheater, *Isra-el*=God prevails, or prevailing with God). In Gen 32:28 God explains that name and why Jacob would be called Israel. But Jacob is still called Jacob in the text until this chapter, where in 35:21 we read "*Israel journeyed on and pitched his tent...*" He has a new name to match his new clothes in repentance, v. 2.

Changing names in the Bible meant a change of identity, a new character.

Changing garments in v. 2 could mean a big life change, like Joseph has to later change clothes before he comes before Pharaoh in a new role (41:14).

The same word is used of these same sons of Jacob later when they receive new changes of clothes from Joseph and Benjamin receives 5 new changes of clothes (45:22). Changed clothes can be a gracious gift giving a new start

We could think back earlier in Genesis where Adam and Eve's garments of fig leaves couldn't cover them as sinners before God, but God in grace gave them new garments He made from the skins of an animal that died instead of them. Those new clothes were acceptable to God by grace to sinners who should have died for eating the fruit but were graciously given a new start.

Is Paul thinking of Gen 35 in Ephesians 4? *Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor... "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry...do not give the devil a foothold [like Simeon and Levi in Gen 34 who sinned in anger, Paul says like 35:2] put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds' (v. 25-27, 22-23 NIV)*

Is there an attitude in my mind I need to change? (That's the 4th question)

Our fifth and final one: Is there knowledge I need to apply or study further?

I want to talk more next week about what God says in v. 11-15 and then the rest of the chapter, but to end today I want to come back to what we know about idolatry for application for our further study. Ex. 20:3 tells us to put no other gods before God (not limited to graven images in the next verse).

Ezekiel 14:1 *Then some elders of Israel came to me and sat down before me. <sup>2</sup> And the word of the LORD came to me, saying, <sup>3</sup> "Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their hearts and have put right before their faces the stumbling block of their iniquity. Should I be consulted by them at all? <sup>4</sup> "Therefore speak to them and tell them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, "Any man of the house of Israel who sets up his idols in his heart, puts right before his face the stumbling block of his iniquity, and then comes to the prophet, I the LORD will be brought to give him an answer in the matter in view of the multitude of his idols, <sup>5</sup> in order to lay hold of the hearts of the house of Israel who are estranged from Me through all their idols." ' <sup>6</sup> "Therefore say to the house of Israel, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, "Repent and turn away from your idols and turn your faces away from all your abominations.*

Colossians 3:5 (KJV) *Mortify therefore ... inordinate affection ... and covetousness, which is idolatry"* (see also Ephesians 5:5)

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A book called *Idols of the Heart*, by Elyse Fitzpatrick, has a chapter called 'Rachel's gods and you.' She talks about how the first mention of idols in the Bible is Gen 31 where Rachel stole her father's household gods. But a chapter earlier, her idolatry in her heart was already on display: Gen 30:1 "*Give me children or I die....*" Fitzpatrick: 'even before Rachel stole her father's idols she was an idolater. Her desire to have children...was the most important thing in her life. It was something she believed that she had to have, and so it was her god ... [what do you] look to for...happiness and security. What do I long for so much that my heart clamors, 'Give me *this*, or else...!' What must I have for life to be meaningful or happy? If I answer that question with anything other than God Himself, then that's what functions as a god for me ... Rachel would say, *If I have children...I'll be happy*. We might say, *If I have a godly spouse or If my children excel in school, I'll be happy* ... if they [or other good desires] take top priority in our lives, they are our gods....*Okay, Elyse, how can I tell if I'm worshiping the blessings that I desire or God? ... If you're willing to sin to obtain your goal or if you sin when you don't get what you want, then your desire has taken God's place and you're functioning as an idolater* ... [then she talks about Jacob calling his family to bring their idols before the Lord and he buries them under that old tree]. You, too, can rest today knowing that as you, by His grace, respond [as the bride of Christ] to your heavenly Husband's command to surrender your idols, He'll bury them under another tree. By His power He can bury all of our false gods ... in union with Jesus Christ, the one who hung on [a] tree [as Gal 3:13 calls the cross], that we have the power to conquer all our idolatry and bury our gods in the blood-soaked ground beneath His cross.<sup>iv</sup>

1 Peter 2:24 *He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.*

Knowing our heart idols is something to apply and study further. Knowing the gospel and applying it to our hearts helps us bury our idols at the foot of Calvary's tree. I close with hymns that help us apply the gospel to our idols, and I encourage you to meditate on them later, sing them, and make your prayer

- # 554 - 'So I'll cherish the old rugged cross, till **my trophies at last I lay down...**'

- # 318 Whiter than Snow - 'Lord Jesus, I long to be perfectly whole; I want You forever to live in my soul, **break down every idol, cast out every foe**—Now wash me and I shall be whiter than snow. Whiter than snow, yes, whiter than snow...'

- # 316 O for a Closer Walk with God - '**the dearest idol I have known, whatever that idol may be, help me to tear it from Thy throne and worship only Thee.**'

- # 424 Jesus Calls Us - 'Jesus calls us from the worship of the vain world's golden store, **from each idol that would keep us, saying, "Christian, love Me more."**

... Jesus calls us: by Thy mercies, Savior, may we hear Thy call, give our hearts to Thy obedience, serve and love Thee best of all.

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<sup>i</sup> Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Genesis*, p. 142.

<sup>ii</sup> Kent Hughes, *Genesis*, p. 426.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, 421.

<sup>iv</sup> Elyse Fitzpatrick, *Idols of the Heart: Learning to Long for God Alone*, p. 22-25, 28.