EXPOSITION OF GENESIS

Message #77

Jacob had a wonderful restorative, positive experience with God in Genesis 35. He turned his back on his sin; led his family back to Bethel; worshipped God and as a result God appeared to him and blessed him. But as soon as the communication with God was over, several sorrowful, negative things to happen.

WHEN A BELIEVER OBEYS GOD HE WILL RECEIVE MANY WONDERFUL BLESSINGS, BUT THAT DOES NOT MEAN HE IS IMMUNE TO MANY NEGATIVE, SORROWFUL SITUATIONS IN LIFE.

The Apostle Paul, who pioneered many N.T. churches, was careful to teach that as a believer “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). Jacob had a peak experience with God and now he would experience several sorrowful experiences from the world.

NEGATIVE/SORROWFUL EXPERIENCE #1 — Jacob’s wife dies. 35:16-20

Verse 16 opens with the announcement that “they journeyed from Bethel.” They were going toward Ephrath, known as Bethlehem, approximately 15 miles south of Bethel. What we learn is where they journeyed, what we don’t learn is why they journeyed.

It has been suggested that Jacob was not completely content in Bethel, so, once again he decided to move, outside of the known will of God. In fact, Mr. John Phillips called this “renewed backsliding” (Exploring Genesis, p. 276). Others suggest that he was free to travel and was probably traveling to see his father, Isaac, in Mamre (35:27), something that would be completely legitimate (W. H. Griffith Thomas, Genesis, p. 338). Regardless of reason, as they were traveling over this rough terrain it apparently induced a hard labor in Rachel and even though she gave birth to a son, she died.

God had apparently revealed to Rachel, years before, that she would have another son (Genesis 30:22-24). Rachel’s midwife obviously remembered this fact and was so positive about the promises of God in Rachel’s darkest hour.

Verse 18 gives us an intriguing look at death. It is very clear that as the soul is separating itself from the body, there is an awareness of what is happening. She names her son “Ben-oni,” which means son of my sorrow.

After Rachel died, she was buried and a pillar was placed upon her grave. Marcus Dods, in the late 1800s, wrote that a tomb is marked where this event happened and still stands on this spot one mile north of Bethlehem (Marcus Dods, Genesis, p. 148).

Jacob was now right with God, but his wife Rachel died. She had been a good wife to him. She was a beautiful woman and Jacob loved her so much that he worked 14 years to marry her (Genesis 29:20, 30). Together, they had experienced the high points and low points. Together they had become worldly, but they came back to God. But no matter how faithful one is, eventually even faithful believers die.
NEGATIVE/SORROWFUL EXPERIENCE #2 — Jacob’s son sins. 35:21-26

Israel was now right with God but many of his sons weren’t. Reuben, Israel’s oldest son, committed an immoral act with his father’s concubine, Bilhah (35:22). Bilhah was Rachel’s maid (35:25) and Reuben would not let her replace his mother Leah (35:23), so he seduced her. This act was never forgotten by Israel and Reuben paid a high price (49:3-4), for as Mr. John Phillips wrote, “God always punishes sexual immorality; sooner or later the axe always falls. Moral, social, spiritual, physical and psychological whips are all available to God with which to chastise those who transgress” (Exploring Genesis, p. 278). Immorality will always eventually surface.

We cannot help but notice that immediately after we learn of this sin (v; 22), we get a listing of all of Israel’s sons. This is no mere coincidence because it is designed to show that Reuben, who committed this terrible sin, was Israel’s firstborn, followed by Simeon and Levi. It will be noticed that the fourth son on the list was Judah. ‘We may recall that Jacob was already upset with Simeon and Levi for their slaughter at Shechem (34:30). Now he is angry with Reuben, his firstborn, for this terrible sin of immorality. Normally, the eldest son is the son who gets the birthright of blessing and promise, however, if we examine Genesis 49:3-12, we discover that Israel refused to bless Reuben or Simeon or Levi, but he did bless Judah. This blessing God would uphold, for out of Judah was born Jesus Christ. This one stupid sin of immorality with his father’s hand maid cost Reuben the great blessing of being the honored lineage of God’s Son. He paid a very high price for his temporal gratification. Just as Esau lost his birthright to Jacob, so Jacob’s sons - Reuben, Simeon and Levi lost theirs to Judah. Jacob was now right with God, but not all things were positive around him.

NEGATIVE/SORROWFUL EXPERIENCE #3 — Jacob’s father dies. 35:27-29

Jacob moved to Hebron, the place where his father lived. Hebron was located about 10 miles south of Bethlehem. Isaac was 180 years old when Jacob once again visited his father. But, as the Sovereignty of God would have it, there was one more funeral Jacob had to attend, that of his father.

It seems from verse 29 that both Jacob and Esau were present at the death of Isaac. If this is accurate, then before Isaac died, he got to see both of his sons together again. Funerals do have a way of mending some family squabbles.

Jacob had wasted many years of life. He devoted so much time and energy to the wrong goals and objectives. But finally his life was right with God and God promised to bless him for it. But that did not keep him immune from various sorrows and heartaches. Jacob had to face the death of the two people on earth he loved the most - his wife Rachel and his father Isaac. He had to face the immorality of his own son Reuben. Jacob had to live with a heavy heart. However, Israel will live to see one of his sons grow to become one of the most honored men in the entire world. God would greatly bless him, but the path to that blessing was not easy.

Purposing to obey God will always bring great blessings, but there will also be some tragedies.