

Thursday Morning Bible Study: Jacob: Exile and Return (Genesis 25-35)

5. Jacob After Exile: Genesis 34-35

Chapter 34 At the end of chapter 33, the word of the LORD to Jacob (28:13-15) that He would be with him, protect him in all his travels, and bring him back to the promised land seems to have reached its completion. Jacob, after parting with Esau, first sojourned at Succoth just outside the land before he “came safely” to the city of Shechem in the promised land, purchasing a plot of land there. And there he built an altar, naming it El-Elohe-Israel, “God, the God of Israel.” It all seems neatly tied up, with a “they all lived happily ever after” feel to it. But... there is quite a lot of Bible to come!

For the people of God live in land that always comes with another people who have a different vision (Brueggemann.) That vision involves a different understanding of the future, a different view of what blessedness is, and a different way of living that flows from that vision. Whether it is the Baalisitic cultures of the Old Testament, the philosophic cultures of the New Testament, or the post-modern secularist cultures of our own time, God’s people live in the midst of these competing visions of the future, blessedness and true human living. The call of God to the people He gives His own name to requires of them faithfulness, wisdom and courage in the face of this vision that competes with His promise.

The question for Jacob now, and for us, is all about survival and faithfulness in the given land. And further, is this land, this situation the end of the story? Hebrews recounts how Abraham obeyed and went out by the word of God to a place he was to receive as an inheritance, and that “By faith, he went to live in the land of promise as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.” None of us lives our lives as a completed story. The whole of our story of our lives is a transitional one, which can only be completed in the fulfilment in the purposes of God in the renewal of all things. Nothing that we receive or lose now is a final receiving or loss. We all wait for the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ who brings the whole story to its God-given end. And this trains us to not place too much expectation on what might happen in this interim time.

Chapter 34 of Genesis is shocking—it begins with the abduction, rape and humiliation of Dinah, Leah’s daughter by the son of the local Hivite chieftain. Dinah was the seventh child born to Leah and Jacob, and she may well have been in her early teens at the time of the events of this chapter. It is a horrendous event. As the chapter proceeds, though, Dinah features less and less, she seems to disappear from view. We are given no sense of the impact of these events on her life. I have recently finished Charles Dickens’ novel, *Dombey and Son*. Strangely given its title, the main character in the novel is neither Dombey nor his son, but Dombey’s unloved and unregarded daughter, Florence. Dombey overlooks her. As I read through this story, I often had in my mind the words of Jesus to Simon the Pharisee when the sinful woman came and knelt and washed Jesus’ feet with her tears and her hair. Simon scorned her, but Jesus asked him, “Do you see this woman?” I kept wanting to ask Dombey, “Do you see your daughter?” So too this week as I have reflected on this difficult chapter, “Do you see this vulnerable, mistreated young woman?” It seems that not one of the men has her in view. Each is caught up in his own agenda—whether the Hivites or the men of

the chosen people of God. None of them see things in the light of the promise and vision of the LORD for the world.

The rapist, Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite chieftain is probably accustomed to having whatever he wants. After the rape, he desires to arrange marriage with Dinah—perhaps there is some remorse there as he speaks tenderly with her—and asks his powerful father to arrange it. Jacob is strangely indifferent to the suffering of his daughter—he does nothing when he first hears of the rape, waiting for her brothers (the six sons of Leah) to return from the field. During this wait, Hamor, Shechem’s father arrives to begin the marriage “negotiations.” But while he’s there, Dinah’s brothers arrive full of anger, having heard of the outrage and set on getting revenge.. They’re deeply, viscerally appalled, and will not be easily appeased. So Jacob wants a peaceful settlement, Hamor is simply pragmatic, even seeing possible mutual economic benefit to both sides and showing no concern about the awful thing that has happened, and the brothers seem more concerned about the communal shame rather than the suffering of their sister.

When negotiations begin for a bride price, the brothers plot a deceptive plan to wreak vengeance—a vengeance so extreme as to be almost genocidal. They want all the men of the city of Shechem to be circumcised—which to Shechem seems a small price to pay. The men of the city agree—they can see economic benefit from the marriage too. After the circumcision, “on the third day, when they were sore” the city is attacked by the vengeful brothers. They killed every male in the town, not just Hamor and Shechem. They rescue Dinah from her captivity, and then that anger turns to opportunistic greed as they plunder the wealth of the slaughtered Hivites, taking their wives, children and wealth—doing just what had happened to their sister.

Jacob is deeply troubled by what has happened—not so much by the appalling disproportion of the attack as by the possible consequence that the other cities of the Canaanites and Perizzites around them will now be very distrustful and antagonistic to Jacob and his family. He feels vulnerable—“My numbers are few...if they attack, I shall be destroyed.” Maybe Jacob does have the covenant promise in view as he desires the survival of this family for the purposes of the LORD for the world. What it does mean is that the “happy ending” is all in pieces, and the family moves again in the land, travelling south and away from this man-made disaster. But it was never a happy ending that was meant to end there; there is no completion of the purposes of God outside of the person and work of Jesus Christ. He alone is the true justice giver, the true peace-maker, the true defender of the vulnerable and oppressed, the true covenant fulfiller.

Chapter 35 When people encounter God, it is not an event that is the product of their seeking, their moving out towards Him, their spiritual exercise or fervour. When people encounter God it is an event that does not arise out of their worship. An encounter with God occurs because of the gracious decision of God to come to and engage people. And worship does not lead to the encounter but rather is the response to which we are summoned in that encounter. God encounters us, meets with us, reveals Himself to us unexpectedly, freely, surprisingly—but most overwhelming of all, *graciously*. That is, He meets us with a determination to set a new course and future for us, set not by the parameters of our sinning against Him, but by the parameters of His holy grace and gracious holiness.

Another way of saying this is to say that God meets us just where we are and as we are, to take us to be just where He is and to be just as He is. Grace is always going

somewhere. Grace is the action of God Himself to include us in the holiness and blamelessness of His own glorious and eternal Son, Jesus Christ. Grace comes as acceptance and forgiveness of God, and so much more! It is the forgiveness and acceptance of us into a process of His recreating, renewing, redeeming action. His intent is that we will attain to the stature of the measure of the fulness of Jesus Christ.

And when we meet this grace—we find that we are summoned and empowered into an appropriate response to this God of grace, a response of worship, a response of love and adoration in self-sacrificial obedience. The end, the goal of the encounter of grace is this kind of worship. And that means that the end, the goal of our lives in Christ is a full and free and unsullied participation in his love and adoration in self-sacrificial obedience to the Father. His worship of the Father is his fulness, his glory, and so it will be ours.

Chapter 35 in Genesis follows the God-less chapter before—and all the awful events in it—with this remarkable call of God to Jacob to go to Bethel and build an altar there to worship him. Here, immediately after these awful events at Shechem, God speaks to Jacob and shows that the gracious covenant purposes are still in place, even given those dreadful events—and He summons Jacob and his family to reorder their lives around His holiness and glory (to worship Him.)

Jacob and his family are under summons; what they are to do is not up to them to determine. They are to go up to worship to where, when and how God calls them. And they hear and respond to that summons. Jacob summoned the family and commands them that they are to put away any foreign gods they have and to purify themselves and re-dress themselves. In the Hivite slaughter, the plunder Jacob's people picked up would most likely have included Shechem's pagan idols. Even household articles they gathered may have been marked with talismanic symbols of this other, ungodly culture. They cannot go up to worship the LORD with these things. The LORD is a jealous God, i.e. He doesn't share His people with other gods. To worship the LORD really does mean to worship Him exclusively. They need to put away all these things, and come appropriately dressed.

This summons of God is echoed in the Scriptures throughout Israel's history, and then in the ministry of John the Baptist, and then in the call to baptism in the church born by the grace of God in Jesus Christ. To hear the summons by God in Jesus Christ is marked by the call to disengage the powers of evil and to order life around the holiness of God, around the renewed world that God has begun in His Son. Paul puts it this way in Ephesians 4:20ff—"But that (i.e. the way of life of those alienated from God) is not the way you learned Christ!— assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness." It is to live in the liberation and cleansing from sin that Jesus has effected through his death and resurrection.

This is how God's people are called to be in a world in which we live amidst a culture that is shaped by another vision, not of the glory of God who appeared to our ancestors and who continues to meet with us, but some other vision of some other glory. We are called away from destructive opposition to this other culture, fearful withdrawal from it, or cowardly and faithless accommodation with it, and we are called into a way of radical disengagement through radical faithfulness in worshipful obedience in the totality of our lives.

So Jacob and the family head off to Bethel. It is not an easy journey. It is marked by threat, due to the ill-will that the slaughter at Shechem has caused—and by God’s protection, seen in the fear that falls on the cities around about that restrains them from attacking this nomadic family. It is also marked by the death of significant people. Firstly, Rebekah’s nurse, who would undoubtedly have been important to Jacob dies near Bethel, and then later, when the family travels on from Bethel to Bethlehem, Rachel, his beloved favourite, dies in labour with her second son (Benjamin). The burial places of both these two women is marked significantly. We hear too of the shameful act of Leah’s oldest son, Reuben who slept with Bilhah, the servant girl who had born sons to Jacob as a surrogate for Rachel. It seems that he is seeking to assert himself as the chief son of Jacob, and saying that Jacob’s day is over. This was an exceptionally shameful act—a version of incest—by this man who had been viscerally appalled at the shameful act committed against his sister and the dishonour brought to the family by Shechem. But now he is dishonouring his father. And what he did had implications for him down the track.

And then at the end of the chapter, Jacob finally is reunited with his father, Isaac, just in time to be there for Isaac’s death and burial when he was “old and full of days.” Esau and Jacob together bury their father, a beautiful sign of their reconciliation at this point.

Danger, protection, death, and sin—these events mark our journey through life and head to the goal to which we are summoned, the fulness of participation in the worship of the Son of God. Death comes as the end of the journey—but for those who are in Christ, death is not the end of the story, for after death comes a full share in the holiness and blameless of Jesus, the Son of God, and the full and free worship of the Father in him. We are called now, in the journey, to anticipate that end by our pursuing through the Spirit our holy participation in all that will be ours in fullness on that day. We are to hear God’s summons in Jesus Christ, hear his instruction for our way, put aside the idols of our age, and pursue the glorious end of worship.