

Genesis 35:1-21 • The Struggle for Spiritual Purity

Introduction

One of the games that some people play is that if they can trick **YOU** into sinning, somehow they themselves have not sinned but kept themselves pure. This is completely, biblically false. The repeated example from Genesis through Revelation is that our first obligation is to encourage others to avoid sin, but when it comes to our attention, to challenge it. It's never good enough for one's personal walk to remain pure in the presence of others around us whose walks are not; sooner or later **both** will fall.

¹Then 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."

[Read v.1]

Q: "Then God said to Jacob...." What is the context for what went on before God spoke to Jacob.

A: Briefly review the events of chapter 33:18-20 and 34:1-31. Jacob had settled in a town called Shechem and bought a piece of land from a man named Hamor. He erected an altar there and named the place *El-Elohe-Israel*, meaning "God, the God of Israel." Hamor was a Hivite. The Hivites, meaning "villagers" or "midlanders," were probably a branch of Hittites, an aggressive people group originally from Asia Minor, now known as Turkey. Hamor was a powerful warlord that had established himself in the area (34:2)

His son was Shechem after whom the town was named. Shechem became infatuated with Jacob's daughter named Dinah, and raped her. He then begged his father Hamor to make an arrangement with Jacob to intermarry the two groups. Upon finding out about the rape, two of Jacob's sons, Levi and Simeon, conspired against Hamor and killed the entire clan. Jacob was not happy about this for fear of reprisals against Jacob's family (34:30).

Q: Why did God instruct Jacob to leave the area and move to Bethel?

A: Most likely to protect Jacob and his family.

Q: What is the significance of Bethel? (See 28:10-22).

A: This is the place of "Jacob's ladder." God promised to be with Jacob no matter where he would go. *Beth-el* means "House of God." Bethel was a "safe place" for Jacob. Bethel was about 30 miles south of Shechem.

Application:

1. How can anger and taking vengeance, even if it seems justified, complicate our lives and the lives of others?
2. What act of anger in the past has caused you regret?
3. What act of anger in the past has caused great inconvenience to those around you?

²So 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; ³and 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.”

[Read v.2-3]

Q: Why is this verse surprising, what does it tell us about Jacob’s household, and what does it tell us about how Diana may have put herself in jeopardy in the first place?

A: We expect Jacob’s household to be as pure and faithful to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as Jacob was. Obviously, it was not. It was gradually being polluted by the people groups around it, and there were already previous hints of idolatry in the camp (see 31:19, 30-32). It is obvious that Rachel herself was not wholly devoted to Jacob’s God. Diana herself may have been flirting with disaster, for 34:1 states, “Diana... went out to visit the daughters of the land,” which would have been the Canaanites and Hivites. Intermingling leads to intermarrying (34:9, 16), and, in Jacob’s case, intermarrying would lead to a polluted “seed line.”

Q: What was Jacob’s neglect in the whole matter?

A: Jacob obviously knew what was going on around him but did little about it. He figured that keeping himself pure and faithful would be sufficient enough. It was not.

Application: *In parenting, what might be the consequences for parents who observe their children involving themselves in questionable practices (drugs, Gothic, certain forms of music) and ignoring the activity, hoping it will just “go away”? How about within the church?*

Q: If Rachel was one of the culprits concerning “foreign gods” (she already had a history of this), why do you suppose she resorted to this practice?

A: Rachel’s older sister, Leah, was the original “Fertile Myrtle.” She seemed to get pregnant without trying. That was killing Rachel (30:1). Her identity was wrapped up in bearing children (as was most women in those days). To be barren was seen as a curse (“reproach”). To hedge the bet, Rachel resorted to the local gods who promised fertility. She eventually became pregnant (30:22-24), but one son was not enough: “May the Lord give me another son.” (Sibling rivalry?) It appears that she never gave up the first gods she stole from her father Laban, and collecting more gods might grant her another child, even though she acknowledged that it was “the LORD” who opened up her womb. She may have been “a double-minded” woman.

[Read v.4-5]

Q: Why were there “a great terror upon the cities which were around them...”?

A: Because they had heard what Jacob’s sons did to Hamor’s clan.

Application: *Which is better, to be loved and accepted by the people around you, or for them to be fearful and intimidated by you? [Hint: The answer might depend on whether YOU are the overwhelming influence on THEM, or THEY on YOU.]*

⁴So 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. ⁵As they journeyed, there was a great terror upon the cities which were around them, and they did not pursue the sons of Jacob.

⁶So Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel), which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him. ⁷He built an altar there, and called the place El-bethel, because there God had revealed Himself to him when he fled from his brother.

⁸Now Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died, and she was buried below Bethel under the oak; it was named Allon-bacuth.

⁹Then God appeared to Jacob again when he came from Paddan-aram, and He blessed him. ¹⁰God 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.

¹¹God also said to him,

“I am God Almighty;
Be fruitful and multiply;
A nation and a company of nations
shall come from you,
And kings shall come forth from you.

¹²The land which I gave to Abraham
and Isaac,
I will give it to you,
And I will give the land to your
descendants after you.”

¹³Then God went up from him in the place where He had spoken with him.

¹⁴Jacob set up a pillar in the place where He had spoken with him, a pillar of stone, and he poured out a drink offering on it; he also poured oil on it. ¹⁵So Jacob named the place where God had spoken with him, Bethel.

[Read v.6-15]

Q: What is the significance of this encounter with God at Bethel?

A: Compare with 32:24-32. This is the second time Jacob's encounter with God affirms the Abrahamic Covenant and the change of name from Jacob (“*he who supplants*”) to Israel (“*he who strives with God*”).

Q: Why does God repeat a second time to Jacob what He had already promised?

A: Like all of us, Jacob wondered if he was still blessed as a result of the sins of Simeon and Levi against the people of the land, and the sins of his household with foreign gods.

Application: *Is there anything that God has promised you that you have subsequently had doubts about? How about your salvation? How about the presence of the Holy Spirit? How about “I shall be with you always, even to the ends of the earth”?*

¹⁶Then they journeyed from Bethel; and when there was still some distance to go to Ephrath, Rachel began to give birth and she suffered severe labor. ¹⁷When she was in severe labor the midwife said to her, “Do not fear, for now you have another son.” ¹⁸It came about as her soul was departing (for she died), that she named him Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin.

¹⁹So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem). ²⁰Jacob set up a pillar over her grave; that is the pillar of Rachel’s grave to this day. ²¹Then Israel journeyed on and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder.

[Read v. 16-21]

Q: What is the other name of “Ephrath” and what significance does it play in messianic prophecy?

A: See Micah 5:2. Ephrath is the original name for the city of Bethlehem.

Q: Why was Rachel’s death ironic in light of her prayer in 30:24?

A: All along, in God’s providence, He may have been withholding the gift of child-bearing from her because, even though she survived it once, as giving birth was very risky for her. Then again, reliance upon foreign gods to enable her to conceive may have played a part, although we don’t know that for sure.

Application: *Is there anything you’ve begged God for that, once you had it, you weren’t quite so sure it was a good idea?*

Q: Why do you think Jacob changed his son’s name from Ben-oni (“the son of my sorrow”) to Benjamin (“the son of my right hand”)?

A: Some believe “the son of my right hand” refers to the significance that Benjamin would later hold in Jacob’s life. But others believe “my right hand” refers to Rachel instead, signifying her importance in Jacob’s life. What do you think?

Final Application:

Name some ways that God redeemed bad situations in chapter 35 and turned them into something of value?

Some examples:

- 1. Just like in Abraham’s case, God used an incident to create a healthy fear in the people around him who might be jealous or envious of his prosperity.*
- 2. God used the incidents of chapter 34 to cause Jacob to finally do something about the idolatry in his midst.*
- 3. God used the flight to Bethel to reaffirm the Abrahamic Covenant and to reinforce Jacob’s name change.*

Q: How has God redeemed bad situations in your life to make things turn out for the good?