

## Struggling with Jacob: A Faithful God and a Man of Faith Genesis 35:16 – 29 Hebrews 11:1-2, 39-40

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### **Introduction**

And so we come to the last in our series on Jacob. We've had 10 sermons over 12 weeks covering 11 chapters, and it's been a ripping yarn.

Our reading of the second half of chapter 35 is the end of this major narrative of Jacob's story. And the whole chapter (we looked at the first half last week) is a bit of reiteration, a bit of a mishmash, with a few odd verses that feel like they could have been left out. But the chapter does round things off, with the death of Jacob's father, Isaac.

After chapter 35 the focus goes off Jacob, and after a chapter devoted to Jacob's brother, Esau, the main human character for the rest of Genesis is Jacob's favourite son, Joseph. It's a well-known story. Jacob does appear in the latter part of the Joseph narrative and Jacob's death is finally reported in Genesis 49 and we will look at part of those final chapters in Genesis today.

So, keep your finger in Genesis 35 and Hebrews 11 and let's pray as we look at what this shows us about God, about Jacob, and about ourselves.

### **Prayer**

Heavenly Father as we wrap up our look at the life of Jacob, speak to us through your word and by your Holy Spirit that we may see your faithfulness and be spurred on in our life of faith. We ask it in Jesus' name and for his glory. Amen

### **Introduction**

Last night was Movie Night. And in a month of westerns, Ryan showed, *'The Good, The Bad and the Ugly.'*

With Steve back on deck on Wednesday, we will have one day, and one day only, of The Good, The Bad and the Ugly – of me, Steve and Rod. I'll let you work out who is who in that scenario.

Over the last three months we've seen something of The Good, The Bad and The Ugly, in one man as we've looked at the life of Jacob. And as we bring the narrative to conclusion today. I think in Jacob, the order is reversed: We see the Ugly and the Bad giving way to the Good. And today we will see something of a **Man of Faith** and a **Faithful God**.

### **1. A Faithful God**

You will recall, as Jacob left home on the run from Esau, God appeared to him at Bethel and said, 'I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring.' (Genesis 28:13-14)

They were big promises – land, many descendants, and blessing to all peoples - fulfilled in Jesus. And there was also a very personal promise. (28:15) 'I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land.'

### **1. faithful to his promises**

One of the recurring themes through Jacob's life that we have seen, is that **God is a Faithful God** and that he is faithful to his promises.

God has watched over Jacob and brought him back to the Land (as he promised). As we heard last week in the first half of chapter 35, Jacob returned to the promised land and said, 'Let us go up to Bethel,

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where I will build an altar to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and who has been with me wherever I have gone.’ (Genesis 35:03)

God has been faithful to his promise; Jacob is back in the land and is moving around the land as a nomadic herder - Bethel to Bethlehem to Migdal Eder to Mamre. There are echoes of Abraham who walked around the promised land (Genesis 13:17), that God was giving him.

And though it will take some generations before Jacob’s descendants are like the dust of the earth, we are reminded in chapter 35 that God is faithful to his promises and things are off to a pretty good start. Benjamin the twelfth and final son is born, and in wrapping up, we are told, (35:22b) Jacob had 12 sons; and then they are all listed to make the point.

God is being faithful to his promises. He has and is, fulfilling those promises, of land and offspring so that Jacob has no reason to doubt, we have no reason to doubt, that God will be faithful to his promise to bring blessing to all through a descendant of Jacob.

In Genesis 49:10 we read of Jacob blessing his sons:

The sceptre will not depart from Judah,  
nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet,  
until he to whom it belongs shall come  
and the obedience of the nations shall be his.

The sceptre speaks of a king and Jewish scholars have long viewed this as a Messianic prophecy that is related to the blessing of all nations. Christian scholars agree and see that the fulfilment has come in Jesus.

In Jacob’s life, in the unfolding Old Testament, in the fulfillment of the New Testament, we see God is faithful to his promises.

### **1b. faithful, despite our sin**

And even as the plan is being fulfilled, here in Genesis 35, we see again, as we have right through, that God is at work despite human frailty, that God is faithful despite human sin.

In chapter 35, three deaths are reported, two in today’s reading. Isaac dies of old age and Rachel dies in childbirth. Death, whenever it occurs, is a constant reminder of sin and of what was lost when Adam & Eve disobeyed God and were sent way from the presence of God, and away from the tree of life. Death reminds us of the word of God from Genesis 2, that because of sin we will ‘surely die.’

As we heard, 35:18, ‘As Rachel breathed her last - for she was dying - she named her son Ben-Oni, which means son of my trouble.’ In this imperfect world we do have trouble, but God is still faithful.

And there is that horrible, but thankfully brief, account of Reuben’s sin. (35:22) Reuben went in and slept with his father’s concubine Bilhah, and Israel (i.e. Jacob) heard of it.

Reuben was Jacob’s firstborn, his mother was Leah whom Jacob did not love. Rachel, the wife whom Jacob loved is now dead so possibly Reuben did this to defile Bilhah so that perhaps now Leah might become Jacob’s favourite. Ancient Near-Eastern custom regarding concubines and inheritance may have been in play but whatever the ‘rationale’ it must be seen as an act of defiance against his father and a horrible sin and it’s a reminder that in spite of all the progress that has been made, God is fulfilling his purposes and being faithful to his promises with a sinful people.

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And then in chapter 37 the sibling rivalry that grows out of Jacob playing favourites with his wives and children leads to Joseph being sold into slavery in Egypt. In chapter 38 even Judah, the one through whom the Messiah would come, sins grievously.

And whilst it is never an excuse for sin - we are called to be a holy people - it is, none the less, encouraging that God's faithfulness is greater than our sin.

God is in control, despite human failings and sinfulness and even uses the failings and sinfulness as the means to bring about his purposes, to fulfil his promises, to unfold his plan of salvation - leading to Jesus Christ.

We worship a Faithful God and with what we've seen of Jacob and family (and what we know of ourselves) it's just as well that God is faithful.

### 2. **A Man of Faith**

But what do you think of Jacob, how would we describe him? Is he just a grasping deceiver, for that is what his name means? Or is he Israel, having struggled and overcome? Is he changed or maybe changing? Could we describe him as a **"Man of Faith"**? Is that a phrase you would use to describe Jacob?

Well, we've heard that description already in our reading from Hebrews 11, the great chapter on faith, 'The Hall of Faith,' as it is often called, with its repeated line: By faith so-and-so did such-and-such. We only read one of them: Hebrews 11:21 By Faith Jacob... What would you follow that with? If Jacob is going to be in the 'Hall of Faith' what should it say? Here are some possibilities:

By faith Jacob ...

- grasped his brother's heel?
- exchanged some red stew for his brother's birthright? No, that was deceit.
- went to his Uncle Laban's place in Paddam Haran? No, he was on the run.
- set up at a pillar at Bethel? Maybe? Some faith.
- married Leah? No, he was deceived!
- did the genetic engineering thing with the spotty sheep? Some faith, perhaps with mixed motives.
- headed for home? No, he snuck off while Laban away shearing.
- prepared to meet Esau? No? He was scared, but consider his prayer.
- changed his name to Israel? No. God did that.
- built an altar and called it El Elohe Israel? Some faith, still a bit mixed?
- stood up for his daughter Dinah? No, feared for himself.
- got rid of household gods and returned to Bethel? Looking more likely.

Hebrews 12:21: By faith Jacob, ...??? What does it say? None of the things I mentioned. Hebrews 12:21: By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshipped as he leaned on the top of his staff.

It's not even anything from the main part of Jacob's story, from Genesis 25-35. It's two things from the end of Genesis, by which time all the family have joined Joseph in Egypt.

We read in chapter 48 how Joseph brings his sons to see Jacob, and the rest of the chapter is taken up with Jacob blessing Manasseh and Ephraim. So why does this action of blessing Joseph's sons rate a mention as something that Jacob did 'by faith'? Well, in that setting, it is first time that the big promises, the future looking promises that God made to him, have actually been on Jacob's lips.

Up until chapter 48 the only promises that Jacob has specifically mentioned are God's promises to be with him. But now, near the end of his life, (48:3-4) Jacob said to Joseph, 'God Almighty appeared to me

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at Luz in the land of Canaan, and there he blessed me and said to me, “I am going to make you fruitful and will increase your numbers. I will make you a community of peoples, and I will give this land as an everlasting possession to your descendants after you.”

And again as he blesses Manasseh and Ephraim, 48:16 ‘May they be called by my name and the names of my fathers, Abraham and Isaac, and may they increase greatly upon the earth.’

Near the end of his life, (when he was dying) Jacob speaks with great conviction, with faith, about the promises God has made to him, looking to their future fulfilment through his descendants.

Jacob’s faith is shown in his conviction that God’s plans were certain and that the promises were being worked out, and would continue to be worked out, under God’s sovereign care.

And this future orientation is characteristic of the faith reported in Hebrews 11:1-2. Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients [Jacob and the others] were commended for.

And this is the faith we see in Jacob. (Heb 11:21) By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph’s sons. Jacob is a man of faith, he has confidence in what he hoped for and assurance about what he did not see.

And we are also told, Hebrews 11:21, ‘By faith Jacob ... worshipped as he leaned on the top of his staff.’ Which is what we read at the end of Genesis. (47:31) Israel worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff.

Why is that ‘by faith’? We need to remind ourselves of the previous verses where, although he is in Egypt, in a statement of faith he says, (47:29) ‘Don’t bury me here take me back and bury me with Abraham & Isaac in the Promised Land.’ And then we read (47:31) Israel worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff.

He requests Joseph to bury him with his fathers - a statement of faith, faith in the promise that the land would be possessed by his descendants. and so the writer to the Hebrews picks this up: By faith, Jacob worshipped as he leaned on the top of his staff.

Jacob was too often the deceiver, the grasper who trusted his own craftiness to achieve his ends, but now after years of growth and in the face of death he is a Man of Faith whose ultimate hope is in the promise of his God.

So at the end of Genesis 49 (v29-33) we read that Jacob instructs his sons, ‘I am about to be gathered to my people. Bury me with my fathers,’ and he gives all the details and then we are told: When Jacob had finished giving instructions to his sons, he drew his feet up into the bed, breathed his last and was gathered to his people.

He had lived to see his family well on the way to becoming a great nation. Though he didn’t live to see his descendants take possession of the land, nor all the nations blessed through them.

Right through the story of Jacob, of Genesis, of the Old Testament, we have this partial fulfilment. So the writer to the Hebrews says, (Hebrews 11:1-2) ‘Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see’. This is what the ancients were commended for. And he says of Jacob and the others, (Hebrews 11:39-40) ‘These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.’

Jacob had received some of what was promised but not the definitive fulfilment of the promise that comes in Christ. We however share in the fulfilment, we live on the other side of the fulfilment to which Jacob and others could only look forward in faith. So how much more should we live by faith, trusting in

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and relying on Jesus, who in his death and resurrection fulfills the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob of blessing being available to all who will have faith in the promises of God, confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.

We have said that we draw encouragement from the fact that Jacob was not perfect but was used by God none-the-less. And it is an encouragement that the great figures of faith in the Old Testament were not perfect but yet persevered. But the writer to the Hebrews wants to say something different to those of us who have received the blessing they were promised – How much more should we stand and persevere in our faith!

Earlier, in the previous chapter he says, (Hebrews 10:24-25) ‘Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised, is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds.’ We are called to stand and persevere in our faith!

### **3. Therefore**

Hebrews 11, that great hall of faith, runs into chapter 12 as to those who have received the promise the writer says, (Hebrews 12:1) ‘Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.’

He doesn’t look at the failures, the sin, the weakness, but to the faith that looked to the fulfilment and rather than say, “isn’t it great that God uses me despite my weakness and sin”, he says:

- throw off everything that hinders,
- throw off the sin that so easily entangles,
- run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

And how can we do that? Well, it’s in the very next verse. We do it by (Hebrews 12:2) fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith.

We learn a lot from Jacob, but we live after the fulfilment of what he looked to, after the death and resurrection of Christ, who makes us new, after the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the living God living in us and transforming us into the image of Christ.

And so, as we come to the end of this series on Jacob, be encouraged by the Sovereignty of God despite human failings and sinfulness; be encouraged by God’s faithfulness, and his grace, even when we fall short. And be even more encouraged by the fact that Jacob was part of God’s unfolding plan of salvation leading to Christ, and as those who live in the fulfilment of that, let us be people of faith.

Jacob was born grasping at his brother’s heel, but died worshipping on his staff. Yes, there were ups and downs, at times it seems a slow process, and we too must persevere to the end, by faith.

In our struggle with God, may we be those who hang on, in our ups and downs may we return to Bethel, the place of our encounter, to the cross, and in response to the God who is faithful may we be people of faith, trusting in Jesus, growing in faithfulness until we reach our promised land of heaven.

And until that day, let us throw off everything that hinders and entangles, and run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.

Amen