

INTRODUCTION TO GENESIS CHAPTER 35

In this chapter we have three communions and three funerals.

I. Three communions between God and Jacob.

1. God ordered Jacob to Bethel; and, in obedience to that order, he purged his house of idols, and prepared for that journey, **#Ge 35:1-5**.
2. Jacob built an altar at Bethel, to the honour of God that had appeared to him, and in performance of his vow, **#Ge 35:6-7**.
3. God appeared to him again, and confirmed the change of his name and covenant with him (**#Ge 35:9-13**), of which appearance Jacob made a grateful acknowledgment, **#Ge 35:14-15**.

II. Three funerals.

1. Deborah's, **#Ge 35:8**.
2. Rachel's, **#Ge 35:16-20**.
3. Isaac's, **#Ge 35:27-29**.

Here is also Reuben's incest (**#Ge 35:22**), and an account of Jacob's sons, **#Ge 35:23-26**.

Ver. 1. thru Ver. 5.

Here,

I. God reminds Jacob of his vow at Bethel, and sends him thither to perform it, #Ge 35:1. Jacob had said in the day of his distress, *If I come again in peace, this stone shall be God's house, #Ge 28:22*. God had performed his part of the bargain, and had given Jacob more than bread to eat and raiment to put on--he had got an estate, and had become two bands; but, it should seem, he had forgotten his vow, or at least had too long deferred the performance of it. Seven or eight years it was now since he came to Canaan; he had purchased ground there, and had built an altar in remembrance of God's last appearance to him when he called him *Israel* (**#Ge 33:19,20**); but still Beth-el is forgotten. Note, Time is apt to wear out the sense of mercies and the impressions made upon us by them; it should not be so, but so it is. God had exercised Jacob with a very sore affliction in his family (Genesis 34), to see if this would bring his vow to his remembrance, and put him upon the performance of it, but it had not this effect; therefore God comes himself and puts him in mind of it: *Arise, go to Beth-el*. Note,

1. As many as God loves he will remind of neglected duties, one way or other, by conscience or by providences.
2. When we have vowed a vow to God, it is best not to defer the payment of it (**#Ec 5:4**), yet better late than never. God bade him go to Beth-el and dwell there, that is, not only go himself, but take his family with him, that they might join with him in his devotions. Note, In Beth-el, the house of God, we should desire to dwell, **#Ps 27:4**. That should be our home, not our inn. God reminds him not expressly of his vow, but of the occasion of it: *When thou fleddest from the face of Esau*. Note, The remembrance of former afflictions should bring to mind the workings of our souls

under them, #Ps 66:13,14.

II. Jacob commands his household to prepare for this solemnity; not only for the journey and remove, but for the religious services that were to be performed, #Ge 35:2,3. Note,

1. Before solemn ordinances, there must be solemn preparation. *Wash you, make you clean, and then come, and let us reason together, #Isa 1:16-18.*
2. Masters of families should use their authority for the promoting of religion in their families. Not only we, but our houses also, should serve the Lord, #Jos 24:15. Observe the commands he gives his household, like Abraham, #Ge 18:19.

(1.) They must *put away the strange gods*. Strange gods in Jacob's family! Strange things indeed! Could such a family, that was taught the good knowledge of the Lord, admit them? Could such a master, to whom God had appeared twice, and oftener, connive at them? Doubtless this was his infirmity. Note, Those that are good themselves cannot always have those about them so good as they should be. In those families where there is a face of religion, and an altar to God, yet many times there is much amiss, and more strange gods than one would suspect. In Jacob's family, Rachel had her *teraphim*, which, it is to be feared, she secretly made some superstitious use of. The captives of Shechem brought their gods along with them, and perhaps Jacob's sons took some with the plunder. However they came by them, now they must *put them away*.

(2.) They must be clean, and *change their garments*; they must observe a due decorum, and make the best appearance they could. Simeon and Levi had their hands full of blood, it concerned them particularly to wash, and to put off their garments that were so stained. These were but ceremonies, signifying the purification and change of the heart. What are clean clothes, and new clothes, without a clean heart, and a new heart? Dr. Lightfoot, by their *being clean, or washing* themselves, understands Jacob's admission of the proselytes of Shechem and Syria into his religion by baptism, because circumcision had become odious.

3. They must go with him to Bethel, #Ge 35:3. Note, Masters of families, when they go up to the house of God, should bring their families with them.

III. His family surrendered all they had that was idolatrous or superstitious, #Ge 35:4. Perhaps, if Jacob had called for them sooner, they would sooner have parted with them, being convicted by their own consciences of the vanity of them. Note, Sometimes attempts for reformation succeed better than one could have expected, and people are not so obstinate against them as we feared. Jacob's servants, and even the retainers of his family, gave him all the strange gods, and the ear-rings they wore, either as charms or to the honour of their gods; they parted with all. Note, Reformation is not sincere if it be not universal. We hope they parted with them cheerfully, and without reluctance, as Ephraim did, when he said, *What have I to do any more with idols? (#Ho 14:8)*, or that people that said to their idols, *Get you hence, #Isa 30:22*. Jacob took care to bury their images, we may suppose in some place unknown to them, that they might not afterwards find them and return to them. Note, We must be wholly separated from our sins, as we are from those that are dead and buried out of our sight, cast them *to the moles and the bats, #Isa 2:20*.

IV. He removes without molestation from Shechem to Bethel, #Ge 35:5. *The terror of God was upon the cities*. Though the Canaanites were much exasperated against the sons of Jacob for their barbarous usage of the Shechemites, yet they were so restrained by a divine power that they could not take this fair opportunity, which now offered itself, when they were upon their march, to avenge their neighbours' quarrel. Note, The way of duty is

the way of safety. While there was sin in Jacob's house, he was afraid of his neighbours; but now that the strange gods were put away, and they were all going together to Bethel, his neighbours were afraid of him. When we are about God's work, we are under special protection. God is with us, while we are with him; and, if he be for us, who can be against us? See **#Ex 34:24**, *No man shall desire thy land, when thou goest up to appear before the Lord*. God governs the world more by secret terrors on men's minds than we are aware of. Ver. 6.

Jacob and his retinue having safely arrived at Bethel, we are here told what passed there.

I. There he built an altar (**#Ge 35:7**), and no doubt offered sacrifice upon it, perhaps the tenth of his cattle, according to his vow, *I will give the tenth unto thee*. With these sacrifices he joined praises for former mercies, particularly that which the sight of the place brought afresh to his remembrance; and he added prayers for the continuance of God's favour to him and his family. And he called the place (that is, *the altar*) *Elbethel, the God of Bethel*. As, when he made a thankful acknowledgment of the honour God had lately done him in calling him *Israel*, he worshipped God by the name of *El-elohe Israel*; so, now that he was making a grateful recognition of God's former favour to him at Bethel, he worships God by the name of *El-beth-el, the God of Bethel*, because there God appeared to him. Note, The comfort which the saints have in holy ordinances is not so much from *Bethel, the house of God*, as from *El-beth-el, the God of the house*. The ordinances are but empty things if we do not meet with God in them.

II. There he buried Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, **#Ge 35:8**. We have reason to think that Jacob, after he came to Canaan, while his family dwelt near Shechem, went himself (it is likely, often) to visit his father Isaac at Hebron. Rebekah probably was dead, but her old nurse (of whom mention is made **#Ge 24:59**) survived her, and Jacob took her to his family, to be a companion to his wives, her country-women, and an instructor to his children; while they were at Bethel, she died, and died lamented, so much lamented that the oak under which she was buried was called *Allon-bachuth, the oak of weeping*. Note,

1. Old servants in a family, that have in their time been faithful and useful, ought to be respected. Honour was done to this nurse, at her death, by Jacob's family, though she was not related to them, and though she was aged. Former services, in such a case, must be remembered.
2. We do not know where death may meet us; perhaps at Beth-el, the house of God. Therefore let us be always ready.
3. Family-afflictions may come even when family reformation and religion are on foot. Therefore rejoice with trembling.

III. There God appeared to him (**#Ge 35:9**), to own his altar, to answer to the name by which he had called him, *The God of Bethel* (**#Ge 35:7**), and to comfort him under his affliction, **#Ge 35:8**. Note, God will appear to those in a way of grace that attend on him in a way of duty. Here,

1. He confirmed the change of his name, **#Ge 35:10**. It was done before by the angel that wrestled with him (**#Ge 32:28**), and here it was ratified by the divine Majesty, or *Shechinah*, that appeared to him. There it was to encourage him against the fear of Esau, here against the fear of the Canaanites. Who can be too hard for Israel, a prince with God? It is below those who are thus dignified to droop and despond.

2. He renewed and ratified the covenant with him, by the name *El-shaddai. I am God Almighty, God all-sufficient (#Ge 35:11)*, able to make good the promise in due time, and to support thee and provide for thee in the mean time. Two things are promised him which we have met with often before:--

(1.) That he should be the father of a great nation, great in honour and power--*a company of nations shall be of thee* (every tribe of Israel was a nation, and all the twelve a company of nations), great in honour and power--*kings shall come out of thy loins*.

(2.) That he should be the master of a good land **#Ge 35:12**, described by the grantees, Abraham and Isaac, to whom it was promised, not by the occupants, the Canaanites in whose possession it now was. The land that was given to Abraham and Isaac is here entailed on Jacob and his seed. He shall not have children without an estate, which is often the case of the poor, nor an estate without children, which is often the grief of the rich; but both. These two promises had a spiritual signification, of which we may suppose Jacob himself had some notion, though not so clear and distinct as we now have; for, without doubt, Christ is the promised seed, and heaven is the promised land; the former is the foundation, and the latter the top-stone, of all God's favours.

3. He then went up from him, or *from over him*, in some visible display of glory, which had hovered over him while he talked with him, **#Ge 35:13**. Note, The sweetest communions the saints have with God in this world are short and transient, and soon have an end. Our vision of God in heaven will be everlasting; there we shall be ever with the Lord; it is not so here.

IV. There Jacob erected a memorial of this, #Ge 35:14.

1. He set up a pillar. When he was going to Padan-aram, he set up for a pillar that stone on which he had laid his head. This was agreeable enough to his low condition and his hasty flight; but now he took time to erect one more stately, more distinguishable and durable, probably placing that stone in it. In token of his intending it for a sacred memorial of his communion with God, he poured oil and the other ingredients of a drink-offering upon it. His vow was, *This stone shall be God's house*, that is, shall be set up for his honour, as houses to the praise of their builders; and here he performs it, transferring it to God by anointing it.

2. He confirmed the name he had formerly given to the place (**#Ge 35:15**), *Beth-el, the house of God*. Yet this very place afterwards lost the honour of its name, and became *Beth-aven, a house of iniquity*; for here it was that Jeroboam set up one of his calves. It is impossible for the best man to entail upon a place so much as the profession and form of religion.

Ver. 16.

We have here the story of the death of Rachel, the beloved wife of Jacob.

1. She fell in travail by the way, not able to reach to Bethlehem, the next town, though they were near it; so suddenly does pain sometimes come upon a woman in travail, which she cannot escape, or put off. We may suppose Jacob had soon a tent up, convenient enough for her reception.

2. Her pains were violent. She had hard labour, harder than usual: this was the effect of sin, **#Ge 3:16**. Note, Human life begins with sorrow, and the roses of its joy are surrounded with thorns.

3. The midwife encouraged her, **#Ge 35:17**. No doubt she had her midwife with her, ready at hand, yet that would not secure her. Rachel had said, when she bore Joseph, *God shall add another son*, which now the midwife remembers, and tells her her words were made good. Yet this did not avail to keep up her spirits; unless God command away fear, no one else can. He only says as one having authority, *Fear not*. We are apt, in extreme perils, to comfort ourselves and our friends with the hopes of a temporal deliverance, in which we may be disappointed; we had better found our comforts on that which cannot fail us, the hope of eternal life.

4. Her travail was to the life of the child, but to her own death. Note, Though the pains and perils of childbearing were introduced by sin, yet they have sometimes been fatal to very holy women, who, though not saved in childbearing, are saved through it with an everlasting salvation. Rachel had passionately said, *Give me children, or else I die*; and now that she had children (for this was her second) she died. Her dying is here called *the departing of her soul*. Note, The death of the body is but the departure of the soul to the world of spirits.

5. Her dying lips called her new-born son *Ben-oni, The son of my sorrow*. And many a son, not born in such hard labour, yet proves the son of his parent's sorrow, and the heaviness of her that bore him. Children are enough the sorrow of their poor mothers in the breeding, bearing, and nursing of them; they should therefore, when they grow up, study to be their joy, and so, if possible, to make them some amends. But Jacob, because he would not renew the sorrowful remembrance of the mother's death every time he called his son by his name, changed his name, and called him *Benjamin, The son of my right hand*; that is,

"very dear to me, set on my right hand for a blessing, the support of my age, like the staff in my right hand."

6. Jacob buried her near the place where she died. As she died in child-bed, it was convenient to bury her quickly; and therefore he did not bring her to the burying-place of his family. If the soul be at rest after death, it matters little where the body lies. In the place where the tree falls, there let it be. No mention is made of the mourning that was at her death, because that might easily be taken for granted. Jacob, no doubt, was a true mourner. Note, Great afflictions sometimes befall us immediately after great comforts. Lest Jacob should be lifted up with the visions of the Almighty with which he was honoured, this was sent as a thorn in the flesh to humble him. Those that enjoy the favours peculiar to the children of God must yet expect the troubles that are common to the children of men. Deborah, who, had she lived, would have been a comfort to Rachel in her extremity, died but a little before. Note, When death comes into a family, it often strikes double. God by it speaks once, yea, twice. The Jewish writers say,

"The death of Deborah and Rachel was to expiate the murder of the Shechemites, occasioned by Dinah, a daughter of the family."

7. Jacob set up a pillar upon her grave, so that it was known, long after, to be Rachel's sepulchre (**#1Sa 10:2**), and Providence so ordered it that this place afterwards fell in the lot of Benjamin. Jacob set up a pillar in remembrance of his joys (**#Ge 35:14**), and here he sets up one in remembrance of his sorrows; for, as it may be of use to ourselves to keep both in mind, so it may be of use to others to transmit the memorials of both: the church, long afterwards, owned that what God said to Jacob at Bethel, both by his word and by his rod, he intended for their instruction (**#Ho**

12:4), *There he spoke with us.*

Ver. 21.

Here is,

1. Jacob's removal, **#Ge 35:21**. He also, as his fathers, sojourned in the land of promise as in a strange country, and was not long in a place. Immediately after the story of Rachel's death he is here called *Israel* (**#Ge 35:21,22**), and not often so afterwards: the Jews say,

"The historian does him this honour here because he bore that affliction with such admirable patience and submission to Providence."

Note, Those are Israel's indeed, princes with God, that support the government of their own passions. He that has this rule over his own spirit is better than the mighty. Israel, a prince with God, yet dwells in tents; the city is reserved for him in the other world.

2. The sin of Reuben. A piece of abominable wickedness it was that he was guilty of (**#Ge 35:22**), that very sin which the apostle says (**#1Co 5:1**) is not so much as named among the Gentiles, *that one should have his father's wife*. It is said to have been *when Israel dwelt in that land*; as if he were then absent from his family, which might be the unhappy occasion of these disorders. Though perhaps Bilhah was the greater criminal, and it is probable was abandoned by Jacob for it, yet Reuben's crime was so provoking that, for it, he lost his birthright and blessing, **#Ge 49:4**. The first-born is not always the best, nor the most promising. This was Reuben's sin, but it was Jacob's affliction; and what a sore affliction it was is intimated in a little compass, *and Israel heard it*. No more is said--that is enough; he heard it with the utmost grief and shame, horror and displeasure. Reuben thought to conceal it, that his father should never hear of it; but those that promise themselves secrecy in sin are generally disappointed; a bird of the air carries the voice.
3. A complete list of the sons of Jacob, now that Benjamin the youngest was born. This is the first time we have the names of these heads of the twelve tribes together; afterwards we find them very often spoken of and enumerated, even to the end of the Bible, **#Re 7:4; 21:12**.
4. The visit which Jacob made to his father Isaac at Hebron. We may suppose he had visited him before since his return, for he *sorely longed after his father's house*; but never, till now, brought his family to settle with him, or near him, **#Ge 35:27**. Probably he did this now upon the death of Rebekah, by which Isaac was left solitary, and not disposed to marry again.
5. The age and death of Isaac are here recorded, though it appears, by computation, that he died not till many years after Joseph was sold into Egypt, and much about the time that he was preferred there. Isaac, a mild quiet man, lived the longest of all the patriarchs, for he was 180 years old; Abraham was but 175. Isaac lived about forty years after he had made his will, **#Ge 27:2**. We shall not die an hour the sooner, but abundantly the better, for our timely setting our heart and house in order. Particular notice is taken of the amicable agreement of Esau and Jacob, in solemnizing their father's funeral (**#Ge 35:29**), to show how wonderfully God had changed Esau's mind since he vowed his brother's murder immediately after his father's death, **#Ge 27:41**. Note, God has many ways of preventing bad men from doing the mischief they intended; he can either tie their hands or turn their hearts.

