

Chapter 15: The Conquest of Jacob

Genesis 35:1–29

Sanctification is a lifelong process. As we have studied the life of Jacob, we have seen the long, slow process God has used to transform a selfish, deceitful, manipulative person into a man who lives by faith. This does not mean, however, that Jacob's sanctification is already complete. In Genesis 34, we saw how far short Jacob still falls from the virtues of godly courage, righteous zeal, and loving compassion. Jacob has come a long way—both geographically and spiritually—but God must bring Jacob yet a little farther to Bethel in order to bring Jacob yet a little further in his sanctification.

In Genesis 35, God fulfills his promises at Bethel in Genesis 28. As God purifies and re-renames Jacob as Israel, God is bringing Jacob's story to its climax and resolution. In part, God is demonstrating his absolute faithfulness to Jacob. More than that, God is finalizing his work with Jacob in order to continue his mission in the next generation after Jacob. God's blessings toward Jacob have not been because of Jacob's merit, and neither have those blessings been for Jacob's exclusive benefit. Rather, through Jacob, God has been working toward blessing the whole world through Jacob's offspring. In Genesis 35, many storylines from Jacob's life come to their conclusion precisely so that the next parts of God's mission in this world may move forward. Here, we see that *God decreases Jacob in order to increase Israel* (cf. John 3:30).

God's Preparation of Jacob (Gen. 35:1–8)

The deep perversity of Genesis 34 ends abruptly. Jacob expresses his fears that the actions of his sons may have made enemies for him among the peoples of the land, while Jacob's sons insist that no one should ever be allowed to treat their sister as a prostitute (Gen. 34:30–31). Jacob finds himself divided not only from the people of the land, but also from his own family. While we do not know how long God waited to speak after the end of Genesis 34, we see that God does eventually call Jacob to move forward from the terrible episode with Dinah and the citizens of Shechem:

[1] God said to Jacob, "Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there. Make an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau." [2] So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, "Put away the foreign gods that are among you and purify yourselves and change your garments. [3] Then let us arise and go up to Bethel, so that I may make there an altar to the God who answers me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone." [4] So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods that they had, and the rings that were in their ears. Jacob hid them under the terebinth tree that was near Shechem. (Gen. 35:1–4)

By the same words that God commands Jacob to return to Bethel, others instructed Jacob to depart

from Canaan, through Bethel, and on to Mesopotamia. So, Rebekah and Isaac both told Jacob to “arise” to go to Mesopotamia (Gen. 27:43; 28:2), and Rebekah and Laban both instructed Jacob to “dwell” there (Gen. 27:44; 29:19).¹ On his way out of Canaan, Jacob encountered God during a night stay at Bethel, and Jacob made a vow to return to that place if God brought him safely back to Canaan (Gen. 28:10–22). God is now reminding Jacob of his vow and informing him that the time has come for Jacob to keep it. Indeed, the phrase “when you fled from your brother Esau” points to Jacob’s original journey (Gen. 27–28), not to his more recent fear during Esau’s approach with four hundred men (Gen. 32–33).² In some ways, Jacob is beginning another new journey; in other ways, Jacob is finally bringing his original journey to its completion.

The Conquest of Jacob

The geography of this passage is important. Currently, Jacob is in northern Canaan, in the city of Shechem, where he has bought land and pitched his tent since first returning to Canaan (Gen. 33:19). Next, Jacob will go to Bethel, which is in central Canaan (Gen. 35:6), and then southward past Bethlehem (Gen. 35:19) and on to Hebron, which is the southernmost part of Canaan in the Negeb (Gen. 35:27). Earlier, Jacob’s grandfather Abraham made this exact journey when he first entered the Promised Land, from Shechem (Gen. 12:6) to Bethel (Gen. 12:8) to the southernmost part of Canaan, in the Negeb (Gen. 12:9). Later, Jacob’s descendants will visit these same places in the land of Canaan on their conquest, first conquering Ai, near Bethel (Josh. 8:9), then worshiping near Shechem on Mount Ebal (Josh. 8:30), and finally invading southern Canaan, including Hebron (Josh. 10:36). For Abraham and Jacob to pass through these cities hundreds of years before the actual conquest symbolizes their taking possession of the land of Canaan by faith.³ Both Genesis 12 and Genesis 35, then, are something like “acted prophecy.”⁴

Even more importantly, we should recall that the conquests of Abraham and of later Israel are primarily conquests of worship, not warfare. Abraham built altars in Shechem and Bethel (Gen. 12:7, 8). Earlier, Jacob built an altar in Shechem (Gen. 33:20), and now God calls him to build an altar in Bethel (Gen. 35:1). Therefore, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob have all built altars (Gen. 12:7, 8; 13:18; 22:9; 26:25; 33:20); however, this is the only occasion when God explicitly commands the construction of the altar.⁵ God will give a similar mandate to later Israel by calling the Israelites to drive out the people of the land because of their wickedness and idolatrous worship, and instructing his people to destroy the remnants of pagan worship when they enter the land (e.g., Deut. 7:1–5). For the patriarchs as well as for the descendants of the patriarchs, God is seeking to establish his holy people in the holy land to engage in holy worship. First, the patriarchs do this by their faithful witness and construction of altars. Later, after hundreds of years of unrepentance, God eventually drives out the inhabitants of the land by the hand of his people who return to execute God’s judgment.

The Purification of Israel

In response to God’s call, Jacob instructs his household to prepare for their journey. He does not focus on the practical details of movement, but on his household’s need for purification before God. First, Jacob insists that his household “put away the foreign gods that are among you” (Gen. 35:2). Although Jacob did not know earlier that Rachel stole Laban’s household gods (Gen. 31:32), it seems that he has learned of them since his final encounter with Laban.⁶ It is also possible that the sons of

Jacob may have plundered idols from the city of Shechem (Gen. 34:27–29).⁷ Regardless of where they acquired the foreign gods, Jacob now insists that his household must put these idols away. Many years later at the same city of Shechem, Joshua will use nearly identical words to instruct the people of Israel to “put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your heart to the LORD, the God of Israel” (Josh. 24:23).⁸ In both cases, putting away idols demonstrates a change of heart by turning in total devotion to the true God.

Second, Jacob instructs his household to “purify yourselves and change your garments” (Gen. 35:2). Changing their garments is a part of the larger process of purification, which usually involved “bathing the body, washing the clothes, and shaving (Lev 14:8–9; Num 8:7).” Putting on new garments symbolizes the spiritual transformation of the person, which has become necessary for them after the defiling sin of the Hivites and against the Hivites.¹⁰ Indeed, the law of Moses considers both sexual intercourse and the shedding of blood (key events from Genesis 34) as pollutions that must be purified (Num. 31:19; Lev. 15:18; 18:24–29).¹¹ A similar transformation took place earlier when God clothed Adam and Eve with skins of an animal to cover their shame, rather than leaving them with the fig leaves that they made for themselves (Gen. 3:7, 21).¹²

This process of purification is one of the primary decreases of *Jacob*—that is, of the sinful nature symbolized by the name *Jacob*, not of the man himself. By purging his household of false gods, Jacob makes a decisive turn away from his old faithlessness. More than that, by dressing his household in clean garments, he is embracing the new identity that God gave him on the banks of the Jabbok as *Israel*—an identity that God will soon restore to Jacob at Bethel (Gen. 32:28; 35:10). While God already gave Jacob a new name, Jacob has not yet embraced the new identity that comes with this name. In this passage, Jacob begins to embrace all the implications of what it will mean for him to become Israel. Notice that God did not command any of these rites of purification in Genesis 35:1, but Jacob nevertheless knows what needs to be done. Jacob is decreasing in order that Israel may decrease.

Answering Jacob in the Day of Distress

Jacob explains that they must arise and go up to Bethel to build an altar to “the God who answers me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone” (Gen. 35:3). The phrase, “the day of my distress” is common, appearing frequently in the Psalms (e.g., Ps. 20:1; 50:15).¹³ The phrase “with me wherever I have gone” echoes God’s own promise from Bethel: “Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go” (Gen. 28:15). Taken together, these two descriptions accurately portray God’s kindness toward Jacob throughout his lifetime: “Jacob was in constant distress, yet in each instance God remained faithful to his promise and delivered him.”¹⁴ Additionally, we must not forget that Jacob made a vow to return to Bethel and worship the Lord if God indeed “will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go” (Gen. 28:20); Jacob is acknowledging that the time has come to keep that vow.¹⁵

Burying the Foreign Gods

Before leaving, the household of Jacob put away their foreign gods and their earrings, which Jacob hides under the terebinth tree near Shechem (Gen. 35:4). It is unclear why Jacob’s household only buries the gods and the earrings, rather than destroying them; however, this action does reflect an ongoing parody against the gods that began in Genesis 31: “Such gods may be stolen, sat on,

stained with menstrual blood, and now *buried*.¹⁶ Moreover, it is unclear why the earrings must be buried, except that earrings were sometimes used to make objects of idolatrous worship (e.g., Ex. 32:2–4; Judg. 8:24–27), and donating jewelry is sometimes a part of the purification process (e.g., Num. 31:50).¹⁷ Regardless of the precise significance, it is clear that the household of Jacob is making a clean break from sinful elements of their past as they prepare to approach the Lord in worship. Much later, Joshua will set up a large stone as a witness against Israel to warn them against further idolatry under that same terebinth tree at Shechem (Josh. 24:26).¹⁸

Terror from God

At the end of Genesis 34, Jacob expressed fear about the possibility of the other inhabitants of the land gathering together to attack Jacob (Gen. 34:30). The journey to Bethel, then, could be dangerous for Jacob and his family, but God provides for Jacob's safe passage:

[5] And as they journeyed, a terror from God fell upon the cities that were around them, so that they did not pursue the sons of Jacob. [6] And Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel), which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him, [7] and there he built an altar and called the place El-bethel, because there God had revealed himself to him when he fled from his brother. [8] And Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died, and she was buried under an oak below Bethel. So he called its name Allon-bacuth. (Gen. 35:5–8)

For all of Jacob's life, he has battled his own fears of God (Gen. 28:17), or Laban (Gen. 31:31), of Esau (27:42; 32:7, 11), and of the surrounding nations (Gen. 34:30), while no one has ever feared him: "Angry, yes; fearful, no."¹⁹ Here, God turns the tables by causing all those surrounding nations to cower in fear of Jacob as he and his family travel in safety. God will later send the same kind of fear against the surrounding nations to protect Israel and God brings his people into the land of Canaan (cf. Ex. 23:27; Deut. 7:20–24; Josh. 2:9–11; cf. Ex. 34:24).²⁰ This passage is a powerful reminder that God can bring his people to safety even through the midst of our most violent, powerful enemies.²¹

Completed Stories

Finally, Jacob and his household arrive at Bethel. Jacob already renamed Luz to Bethel (Gen. 28:19), but the fact that the narrator calls Bethel by its old name seems to parallel Jacob's own need to be transformed again from Jacob to Israel (Gen. 32:27–28; 35:10).²² Once he arrives, Jacob builds the altar and re-renames the place "El-bethel" ("The God of Bethel") as a memorial to the fact that God revealed himself to him there so many years earlier (Gen. 34:7, 15). The last time Jacob was at Bethel, he only raised a pillar on the spot and poured oil on top of it as an offering to God (Gen. 28:18). By building an altar, Jacob is expressing much the same sentiment, but on a larger scale. At that last meeting, Jacob vowed to give God a "full tenth" of his wealth (Gen. 28:22), and Jacob likely uses the altar to sacrifice his tithe to God, although the text does not tell us as much.²³ God has done all that he promised Jacob that he would do, and Jacob has fulfilled his vow. Jacob's long detour away from Canaan, through Mesopotamia, and back to Canaan began and now ends at Bethel.

At this time, the narrator also informs us of the end of another story in Jacob's life with the death of Deborah, Rebekah's nurse (Gen. 35:8). Deborah traveled with Rebekah from Mesopotamia (Gen.

24:59), but she is not named in Genesis until her death here.²⁴ Most likely, Jacob's burial of Deborah signifies that Rebekah has already died at some point during Jacob's twenty years in Mesopotamia.²⁵ While Rebekah only thought that her son would be gone "a few days" (ESV: "a while"; Gen. 27:44), that conversation was the last time that Rebekah and Jacob saw each other. Although it may have seemed that Rebekah got away with her scheming, deception, and control in stealing the blessing for Jacob, her separation from her son is the bitter fruit of her sin. By burying Deborah, Jacob must acknowledge the end his relationship with his mother too.

God's Purposes for Israel (Gen. 35:9–15)

After Jacob fulfills his vow by returning to Bethel and worshiping there, God appears to Jacob again to bless him and recommission him:

[9] God appeared to Jacob again, when he came from Paddan-aram, and blessed him. [10] And God said to him, "Your name is Jacob; no longer shall your name be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name." So he called his name Israel. (Gen. 35:9–10)

Jacob stole the blessing from Esau through deception (Gen. 27:35), but Isaac also explicitly blessed Jacob even after discovering what Jacob did (Gen. 28:1–4). In Mesopotamia, Laban clearly recognized the blessing of God in the life of Jacob (Gen. 30:27, 30). Later, God blessed Jacob when he wrestled with him beside the Jabbok river (Gen. 32:29).²⁶ Whatever doubt may have lingered because of the original way in which Jacob obtained the blessing have vanished entirely. By grace, God clarifies beyond all question that he intends to bless Jacob.

The Re-Renaming of Jacob

While Jacob wrestled with God, God asked Jacob his name and then renamed Jacob to Israel, explaining that, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed" (Gen. 32:28). Why should Jacob need to be renamed twice? First, we should remember that Jacob is not the only one to be renamed twice. Again, we just read that Luz was renamed to Bethel for a second time (Gen. 28:19; 35:7). Also, later on, Jesus will rename Simon as Peter on two different occasions—once at the beginning of his ministry, and once later on (Matt. 16:17, 18; John 1:42).²⁷ Here, the purpose seems to be to underscore the total transformation that Jacob must undergo: "He is not only to bury the foreign gods, but he is to bury what has become for all practical purposes a foreign nature—a Jacob nature. He who earlier instructed the people to change their garments must live up to his own change of name."²⁸ Even the omission of the earlier discussion of Jacob's striving with God and man (Gen. 32:28) this time around seems to remove any negative sense to the name Israel, leaving the name unstained as Israel moves forward—both as a man and as a nation.²⁹

In context, by re-renaming Jacob, God is leading Jacob to repent for falling back to his faithlessness after God both wrestled with him, protected him from Esau, and settled him in Canaan. Jacob lived faithlessly throughout the entire story of the Dinah's rape, loving comfort and security more than justice and righteousness for his daughter. Furthermore, the ongoing presence of false gods and earrings in Jacob's household demonstrates that Jacob has not been a godly head of his

household (Gen. 35:2, 4). Because of this, God must not only remind Jacob of his new identity, but he must also reinstate Jacob into that new identity. The old *Jacob* identity must decrease so entirely as to vanish altogether.

God's Blessing for Jacob

After re-renaming and recommissioning Jacob as Israel, God restates all the blessings that he has promised to Abraham, Isaac, and to Jacob:

[11] And God 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 from your own body. [12] The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you.” [13] Then God went up from him in the place where he had spoken with him. [14] And Jacob set up a pillar in the place where he had spoken with him, a pillar of stone. He poured out a drink offering on it and poured oil on it. [15] So Jacob called the name of the place where God had spoken with him Bethel. (Gen. 35:11–15)

There are many echoes here from the covenant of circumcision in Genesis 17.³⁰ First, God revealed himself to Abraham then as “God Almighty” (Gen. 17:1; 35:11). Second, God also insisted that he would multiply Abraham greatly, and that he would make Abraham exceedingly fruitful (Gen. 17:2, 6; 35:11; cf. Gen. 1:22, 28; 9:1, 7; 17:20; 28:3).³¹ Third, just as God here renames Jacob to Israel, it was also during this covenant of circumcision that God changed Abram’s name to Abraham (Gen. 17:5; 35:10). Fourth, the name change from Abram to Abraham is important, since Abraham means “the father of a multitude of nations” (Gen. 17:5). Here, God uses slightly different language to tell Jacob that a “nation and a company of nations shall come from you” (Gen. 35:11).³² Fifth, God also promised Abraham that “kings shall come from you” (Gen. 17:6; 35:11). Sixth, God promised to give Abraham and his offspring all the land of Canaan (Gen. 17:8; 35:12). Jacob will certainly decrease; however, as Israel, God will bless him by causing him to increase through fruitful, royal, multinational multiplication.

The promises of fruitfulness and multiplication were surprising for Abraham, who only had one son at the time, Ishmael, whom God said would not be the recipient of the promises (Gen. 17:18–21). For Jacob, however, these promises are less surprising, since Jacob already has eleven sons and his daughter Dinah.³³ God has more in mind than just several first-generation sons and daughters; instead, God intends to make Jacob into a *nation*. More than that, God intends to make Jacob into a *company of nations*. The word for *company* is the Old Testament word for “church,” and indeed, God intends to make a Church out of Jacob, as John Calvin points out:

But to me it appears that the Lord, in these words, comprehended both these benefits; for when, under Joshua, the people was apportioned into tribes, as if the seed of Abraham was propagated into so many distinct nations; yet the body was not thereby divided; it is called an assembly of nations, for this reason, because in connection with that distinction a sacred unity yet flourished. The language also is not improperly extended to the Gentiles, who, having been before dispersed, are collected into one congregation by the bond of faith; and although they were not born of Jacob according to the flesh; yet, because faith was to them

the commencement of a new birth, and the covenant of salvation, which is the seed of spiritual birth, flowed from Jacob, all believers are rightly reckoned among his sons, according to the declaration, I have constituted thee a father of many nations.³⁴

The language of *nations* also echoes the oracle describing Jacob and Esau as “two nations” in the womb of Rebekah (Gen. 25:23).³⁵ Of course, the idea of *nations* ties closely together with *kings*, and by prophesying that kings will come from Jacob, God directs our attention over the coming chapters to attempt to discern the identity of these kings. John Salhamer writes, “In the narratives that follow, the writer holds both sons, Joseph and Judah, before the readers as rightful heirs of the promise. As the Jacob narratives have already anticipated, in the end it is Judah the son of Leah, not Joseph the son of Rachel, who gains the blessing (49:8–12).”³⁶ From Jacob’s son Judah shall come forth not only kings, but ultimately even the King of kings.

Reconsecrating and Re-Renaming Bethel

After God “went up” from Jacob, Jacob repeats virtually the same worship ceremonies he did two decades ago: he sets up a pillar of stone, pours a drink offering on it, pours oil on it, and re-renames it Bethel (Gen. 35:13–15; cf. Gen. 28:18–19). Even though the ceremony is nearly identical, it is also very different. Twenty years ago, Jacob worshiped as a man looking forward to the fulfillment of God’s promises; now, Jacob worships as a man looking back on the fulfillment of God’s promises. As Derek Kidner writes, “God’s repetitions, if this is a sample, are turns of a spiral rather than a wheel.”³⁷ God never calls us to mindlessly repeat anything, but to grow closer and closer to him as he draws us tighter and tighter in the spiral toward himself.

God’s Path Toward Christ (Gen. 34:16–29)

After fulfilling his vows in Bethel, Jacob continues his journey southward:

[16] Then they journeyed from Bethel. When they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel went into labor, and she had hard labor. [17] And when her labor was at its hardest, the midwife said to her, “Do not fear, for you have another son.” [18] And as her soul was departing (for she was dying), she called his name Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin. [19] So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem), [20] and Jacob set up a pillar over her tomb. It is the pillar of Rachel’s tomb, which is there to this day. [21] Israel journeyed on and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder. (Gen. 35:16–21)

In those days, childbirth was much more dangerous than now, and many women died while delivering children.³⁸ Still, there are some unique elements surrounding this death during childbirth. Earlier, when Rachel was still unable to conceive, she demanded of Jacob, “Give me children, or I shall die!” (Gen. 30:1), and now she ironically dies in childbirth.³⁹ Moreover, when Rachel gave birth to Joseph, she prayed, “May the LORD add to me another son!” (Gen. 30:24), and the midwife reminds Rachel of the fulfillment of her prayer: “Do not fear, for you have another son” (Gen. 35:17).⁴⁰ Rachel saw so much of her identity bound up in childbearing, but childbearing ultimately

led to her death.

The Birth of Benjamin and Death of Rachel

Benjamin is distinct from his brothers in two important ways: (1) he is the only of Jacob's children to be born in Canaan, and (2) he is the only of Jacob's children whom Jacob names.⁴¹ Rachel's choice of Ben-oni refers to her sorrow, since the word for "sorrow" (אֹנִי; *'óni*) describes the mourning of the dead (Deut. 26:14; Hos. 9:4).⁴² The name *Benjamin* has a dual sense. On the one hand, "right" referred to the south, since people living in Canaan oriented themselves with their backs to the Mediterranean Sea in the west; on the other hand, the "right hand" refers to honor (Ps. 110:1), skill (Ps. 137:5), and soundness (Eccl. 10:2).⁴³ Later, Jacob will describe Benjamin as a "ravenous wolf" (Gen. 49:27), a nuance of "right hand" that has to do with the power and strength of the son who holds his father's great favor.⁴⁴

In burying his wife, Jacob sets up a pillar over her tomb, similarly to the pillar he set up in worship at Bethel (Gen. 35:14, 20). This pillar stands as a witness to Jacob's pain, while the previous pillar commemorates God's grace to be with us wherever we go: "Rachel's pillar, with such a background, has poignancy, but not the dull despair of Absalom's (2 Sam. 18:18)."⁴⁵ Rachel was Jacob's favorite wife, but just as his favor could not prevent his marrying her sister as a rival wife (Gen. 29:25), so his favor cannot protect her death. Jacob must bury his wife and journey on southward toward his goal.

The Incest of Reuben

At this point, Jacob experiences yet another heart-ache as his oldest son commits incest with Rachel's female servant whom Jacob married as a concubine, Bilhah (Gen. 30:4):

[22] While Israel lived in that land, Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine. And Israel heard of it.

Now the sons of Jacob were twelve. [23] The sons of Leah: Reuben (Jacob's firstborn), Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun. [24] The sons of Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin. [25] The sons of Bilhah, Rachel's servant: Dan and Naphtali. [26] The sons of Zilpah, Leah's servant: Gad and Asher. These were the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Paddan-aram. (Gen. 35:22–26)

With classic Hebrew understatement, this shocking act of incest is reported in matter-of-fact minimalism. All we read of Jacob's response is that he "heard of it" in similar language to how he "heard" that his daughter Dinah had been defiled (Gen. 34:5).⁴⁶ We do not learn of Jacob's true reaction to Reuben's crime until he curses his son in Genesis 49:3–4.⁴⁷

This incident is important, though, since it prepares the way for the Joseph narratives that begin in Genesis 37. In all likelihood, Reuben acted less out of desire for Bilhah and more to ensure that Rachel's female servant will not gain the favor that Rachel once had.⁴⁸ Remember, Reuben is the son of Leah—the son who has sought all his life to assist his mother in finding the favor of Jacob, even from his youngest days when he gathered mandrakes to help Leah bear more children (Gen. 30:14). Sadly, although this plan may sideline Bilhah to some degree (cf. 2 Sam. 20:3), Reuben does not help to elevate Leah. Instead, Jacob clings all the more tightly to the *children* of Rachel—first Joseph, and

later Benjamin.

The Son of Judah and the Son of Joseph

Still, this event has one more important effect: it disqualifies the first three of Jacob's sons from receiving the lion's share of Jacob's blessing at the end of his life. There, Jacob reveals that Simeon and Levi have already disqualified themselves because of their violence against the city of Shechem (Gen. 49:5–6), but now Jacob's firstborn, Reuben, has also disqualified himself because of going into his father's concubine (Gen. 49:3–4). Remember, God has just promised Jacob that "kings will come from your own body" (Gen. 35:11). Since the first three of Jacob's sons have disqualified themselves, the kingship will fall on the fourth son in the line of succession: Judah.⁴⁹ The narrator hints at this by listing out the children of Jacob immediately after telling us about the sins of Simeon, Levi, and Reuben (Gen. 35:23–26). Additionally, the inclusion of Benjamin brings the number of Jacob's sons to twelve, demonstrating the completeness of Jacob's family.⁵⁰

The narrator, then, will tell us much of Judah's development in the closing chapters of Genesis from the cruel man who proposes selling Joseph into slavery into the self-sacrificing, regal man whose offspring will fulfill God's promises to Jacob about kingly descendants (Gen. 37:26–28; 38; 43:3, 8–10; 44:14–34; 46:12, 28; 49:9–12). The majority of the attention in the final chapters of Genesis, however, will fall on Joseph. Joseph's development is inverse of Judah's. Judah starts on top, but must be humbled in order to grow. Joseph, however, immediately descends by suffering more and more despite his righteousness and innocence, until he emerges from the pit of an Egyptian prison to be seated at the right hand of Pharaoh. These two portraits are so compelling in the story of the Bible that some ancient Jewish rabbis believed that there will eventually be two Messiahs: the Son of Joseph Messiah, a suffering servant, and the Son of David Messiah (David is Judah's kingly descendant), a conquering warrior king.⁵¹ They could not imagine how one figure could fulfill both roles, even though we see such an example in Jesus Christ, the (figurative) Son of Joseph who came first to suffer and die, and who will some day return as the (literal) Son of David to conquer his enemies forever. Already, Genesis is setting up these two paradoxical motifs for understanding the coming Messiah that will play out through the rest of the Scriptures.

The Death of Isaac

Returning to Jacob, we see that the patriarch has one last hardship to endure in this chapter in the death of his father, Isaac:

[27] And Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre, or Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had sojourned. [28] Now the days of Isaac were 180 years. [29] And Isaac breathed his last, and he died and was gathered to his people, old and full of days. And his sons Esau and Jacob buried him. (Gen. 35:27–29)

Notice first that Jacob has completed his conquering journey through Canaan, all the way from northern Shechem to southern Hebron. In the middle of this journey, God promised him that he will surely receive the land of Canaan as a gift to his offspring forever (Gen. 35:12). By the totality of this journey, Jacob lays hold of the land by faith, even if not yet in actuality. His descendants will have to complete the same journey in order to take final possession of the land.

When Jacob reaches Hebron, we read that Isaac dies at the age of 180 years. Isaac was 100 years old when Esau married (Gen. 26:34; cf. Gen. 25:26), and he believed that he was about to die (Gen. 27:2, 4); however, he apparently lives another eighty years after believing that he was about to die (assuming that Genesis 27 follows immediately after Esau's marriage).⁵² While Isaac lives this long, Rebekah has presumably died, as we discussed earlier. The deaths of Deborah and Isaac in this chapter close out the stories of the generation before Jacob and Esau.

Furthermore, this scene largely closes out the story of Jacob's and Esau's own generation.⁵³ In a scene very similar to the way that Ishmael and Isaac reconciled to bury their father Abraham, Esau and Jacob reconcile to bury their own father Isaac (Gen. 25:9; 35:29).⁵⁴ As in Genesis 25, when after the burial of Abraham we read of the generations of Ishmael (Gen. 25:12–18), so we will next read of the generations of Esau (Gen. 36). Jacob will not die until the end of the book (Gen. 49:33), but his son Joseph will be the focus of attention. Indeed, this chapter demonstrates that Jacob's story has run its most important course: God has completely fulfilled his promises to Jacob by bringing Jacob back to the house of his father in peace (Gen. 28:21).⁵⁵ With this promise fulfilled, the story must move on to the next generation as God leads his people toward Egypt to accomplish even bigger plans for the offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—not only by leading them in exodus out of their captivity, but by eventually delivering them from their bondage to sin through the birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and return of the Lord Jesus Christ. All God's people must decrease in order that the glory of Christ might increase throughout eternity.

Discussion Questions

1. Just as Abraham did, Jacob walks the path Israel will take during the conquest (Gen. 12:6–9; Josh. 8; 10). What might change if you walked entirely by faith in God's work beyond your lifetime? How does our hope in the future resurrection give us confidence for today (1 Cor. 15:58)? What short-term sacrifices might we make in this life for the sake of the kingdom?
2. Before Jacob goes to Bethel, he and his household purify themselves (Gen. 35:2–4). Have you been purified by the blood of Jesus Christ, through repentance and faith? What sins do you allow to remain in your life, like the idols that lingered in Jacob's household? What aspects of your righteousness in Christ do you need to wear, like the clean garments of Jacob's household?
3. Jacob must put away his old identity as Jacob in order to embrace his call to be Israel (Gen. 35:10–15). What aspects of your old, rebellious identity must you put away in order to embrace your new identity in Christ? God promised Israel that he would be fruitful (Gen. 35:11); what kind of fruit does Jesus promise that all those who abide in him will bear (John 15:5)?
4. Jacob must decrease in order for God to continue his work in the next generation, as Judah and Joseph take center stage in redemptive history (Gen. 35:22–26; 37–49). What does it mean for you to decrease in order for Christ, who is true Israel, may increase (cf. John 3:30)? What does it mean for you to decrease by seeking to raise up the next generation of believers?

Notes

1. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 323.
2. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 374.
3. Umberto Cassuto, *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, 8 vols. (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1955–1956), 1:65–66. Cited in Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 140–41.
4. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, WBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 283.
5. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 616.
6. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 233–34. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.xiii.i.html>>
7. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 324.
8. Cassuto, *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, 1:65–66. Cited in Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 141.
9. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 324.
10. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 235–36. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.xiii.i.html>>
11. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 324.
12. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 376.
13. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 324.
14. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 202.
15. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 324.
16. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 375.
17. “The family members respond as requested, putting away their foreign gods and also their earrings. The significance of this last point is elusive. On two later occasions, earrings were used to make objects of idolatrous worship, the golden calf and an ephod (Exod 32:2–4; Judg 8:24–27). It could be that burying the earrings along with the foreign gods expressed their determination to dispose of the idols and also any material that could be used to replace them. A comparison with Num 31:48–54 suggests a quite different possibility. After the battle with the Midianites, the Israelites had to purify themselves (Num 31:19–20). Part of their purification process included donating to the sanctuary booty consisting of ‘articles of gold, armlets and bracelets, signet rings, earrings, and beads to make atonement for ourselves before the LORD’ (Num 31:50). This suggests that the rings removed by Jacob’s sons may well have been part of the booty captured by them from the Shechemites; indeed it is possible that the outer garments and the foreign gods (gold-plated idols?) were part of the spoil (cf. Num 31:20; Josh 7:21; Deut 7:25). We have already noted the close parallels between Gen 34 and Num 31:1–9....These further parallels strengthen the case for reading all of 35:1–4, not merely v 5, in the light of chap. 34.” (Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 324.)
18. Cassuto, *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, 1:65–66. Cited in Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 141.
19. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 377.
20. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 324.
21. “Wherefore, whenever we see the wicked furiously bent on our destruction, lest our hearts should fail with fear and be broken by desperation, let us call to mind this terror of God, by which the rage, however furious, of the whole world may be easily subdued.” (Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 237. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.xiii.i.html>>)
22. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 325.
23. Walton, *Genesis*, 631. Others speculate that the money Jacob used to purchase the plot of land in Canaan from Hamor and Shechem (Gen. 33:19) may have constituted his tithe (e.g., Kidner, *Genesis*, 182–83.)
24. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 325.

25. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 378–79.
26. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 621.
27. Kidner, *Genesis*, 186.
28. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 381.
29. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 202–03.
30. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 325.
31. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 381.
32. Kidner, *Genesis*, 186.
33. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 381.
34. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 241–42. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.xiii.i.html>>
35. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 325.
36. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 203.
37. Kidner, *Genesis*, 186.
38. Walton, *Genesis*, 632.
39. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 270.
40. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 326.
41. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 384.
42. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 326–27.
43. Kidner, *Genesis*, 187.
44. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 625–26.
45. Kidner, *Genesis*, 187.
46. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 327–28.
47. Kidner, *Genesis*, 187.
48. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 327.
49. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 204.
50. Kidner, *Genesis*, 187.
51. Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Jesus Was a Jew*, rev. ed. (San Antonio, TX: Ariel Ministries, 2014), 37, 43,
- 57.
52. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 389.
53. Kidner, *Genesis*, 187.
54. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 328.
55. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 204.