

The Next Generation - Kevin Miller, 30 minutes, **Genesis 35:1-29** (#525)

Introduction: Transitions are hard. Maybe it's the change from one grade to another. Or from one job to another. Or into retirement. These are often joyous occasions, but that doesn't mean they aren't hard. There are other life transitions that aren't usually as positive, such as becoming an empty-nester or moving into a skilled care facility. And there are still yet more life changes that pose challenges of a different sort: elections, social and cultural trends, economic ups and downs. There's no way to minimize the fact that transitions are hard. They bring with them all kinds of fears and doubts, they have a way of bringing our own insecurities to the forefront. Previously even-keeled people become worriers, as we wonder what the future will hold and how we will cope with it.

If you think that kind of worry is a modern phenomenon, then this chapter will be a wakeup call for you: change produces stress in all of us. Yet, it is what we do with that stress – not only how we handle it personally but Who we look to and trust in during the pressure of it – that will make the difference between fear and quiet confidence, between untamed worry and faithful devotion.

As we rapidly approach the end of Jacob's time in the limelight, what will life look like for God's people? The Lord has made many promises to Jacob, including land, descendants, and protection. Elements of each part of that blessing have already been fulfilled – with more on the way. But what will happen when change comes knocking? Can God still be relied upon? Is He solid granite that we can cling to? Or sandstone – offering the appearance of hope, yet crumbling away under the weight of change and challenge? Let's see our Lord again in **Genesis 35**. As you turn there, let me set our chapter in context. At first glance, it will seem like these verses are a random collection of anecdotes and stories from the life of Jacob and those around him, but there's actually a very important pattern here that, if seen, will help us to make more sense not only of this chapter, but also of how **Genesis** flows overall. Professor Gordon Wenham points out that there is a threefold pattern in **Genesis**: when we arrive at transitions like these, we see the same kinds of steps and events. This held true with Abraham, back in **Genesis 22-25**, we'll see it here in **chapter 35**, and we'll come to it again in a future sermon series with Joseph in **chapters 46-49**. In each case, we will read of a call from God to go on a journey,

the response to that call, and God's promises being reaffirmed. Next, we are told of the journey itself, the birth of one or more children, and the death and burial of a wife. Lastly, each of these three sequences speaks of a son's marriage or relations, a list of descendants, and finally the death and burial of a patriarch.

Now, that's a lot of detail, to be sure – and you don't need to worry about memorizing each step. But I want you to see from the outset that there really is a pattern here. These aren't just random stories that didn't fit anywhere else – instead, what we'll see with Jacob in this chapter is the same sort of thing that has already happened with Abraham and which will happen again with Joseph. With that said, let's now see the story for ourselves...

35:1-4 We're past many of the most memorable events of Jacob's story at this point – and it seems like we've had all kinds of “cliff hangers” and “to be continued's.” Some of those will be resolved in this chapter and others will be introduced. While Jacob will pop up occasionally in the chapters to come, largely his time in the spotlight will end with this chapter, which signals change and transition. What does that look like?

The Lord speaks to Jacob again and calls him to Bethel, which – if you'll recall – is where God first appeared to Jacob and where he had made a vow to the Lord. Vows are taken very seriously in the Scriptures, and the Lord is reminding Jacob that now is the time to keep his. In Bethel, Jacob is to make an altar to the Lord, and the worship of God requires a certain purity. We might think of the Ten Commandments here, where God's people will be told that they must have “no other gods” and that they are to worship the Lord only. This has always been the standard, and we see it here in Jacob's command to his family: all of the foreign gods that any of the family worshipped are to be “put away.” Not put away in the sense of packing them carefully and neatly into a moving box, but put away in the sense of removing them. Further, the family are to purify themselves and their clothing. Holiness is what is in view here, and it is what is required of all who wish to draw near to the Lord.

Note Jacob's reasoning: what he tells the family isn't just “God said we have to move,” but instead he points out two very crucial things – we might say that these

two things are the turning points of how the Lord has dealt with Jacob: first, God has repeatedly answered him during times of trouble and trial. Second, Jacob also remembers that the Lord “has been with me wherever I have gone.” God did not forget or abandon Jacob, even through some pretty unfaithful times. The Lord did not give him a mission and then say “Good luck – hope to see you on the other side!” No, where the Lord called, guided, and directed, He provided and was with Jacob every step of the way.

All of which sets the scene with two truths that you and I need to hold dear. First, we need to realize that to follow the Lord, to be called a disciple of Jesus, is to live a very different life from those who don’t follow Him. You can’t have one foot in this kingdom and another in Christ’s kingdom. No foreign gods would be allowed then, and none are today, either. The allegiance that Jesus calls you to is absolute: either He is your King or He is not. What do you need to give up to follow Him as a disciple? What might you be holding on to from your life before Christ that is keeping you from growing in your trust and obedience to Him? Ask the Lord to do the pruning work in your life this very week. The transition may be hard, but it will be good in every way that matters.

Second, Jacob’s understanding of the Lord’s faithfulness is remarkably encouraging, isn’t it? The Lord didn’t call Jacob to anything or anyplace where God Himself wouldn’t be present or wouldn’t take care of him. I realize you and I aren’t patriarchs. Nevertheless, have you ever noticed how often Jesus tells His followers to not be afraid? To trust Him? To follow Him? How He reminds them of how He will be with them (think of the Great Commission)? God has not told you to go do something while He Himself sits idly by, waiting to see if you’ll succeed or fail. No, Christ’s incarnation – His birth and life and death and resurrection, proves that God is truly “with us.” What’s more, the Lord’s presence isn’t simply something out of the past that we look back to, awaiting the day when we’ll be with Jesus again. That will be a day beyond amazing, to be sure! Yet, even as we await it, the Lord is with His people today via the indwelling Holy Spirit. If you are a Christian, then you have the Holy Spirit inside you. Think of what that means: God is constantly with you, through your day, your ups and downs, your struggles – and yes, even your sins. And He is interceding for you, caring for you, guiding you, correcting you. Some of you may feel at times like God has

abandoned you – as if your sins are too great or your hardships too large. Christ’s life and the indwelling Holy Spirit remind you that He has not left you twisting in the wind, but instead – much like with Jacob – the Lord has been and shall be with you. He will see you safely to your heavenly home.

Transitions: when God calls, all who hear and respond will be different, it may be difficult, but He will be with you. Yet, what about the journey? Let’s keep reading...

35:5-8 Do you recall Jacob’s fear at the end of **chapter 34**? He was greatly concerned that the surrounding people would destroy him and his household because of how the brothers had taken revenge for Dinah upon the city of Shechem. Certainly, Jacob’s reaction would be natural: an eye for an eye often leads to losing limbs and lives as well! Yet he had forgotten one thing: God was with him. God had promised him not just blessing for life then and there, but also to come in the future – a divine care that would continue through the generations. For that to happen, God had to protect this small family from the peoples around them. And that, as we read here, is exactly what the Lord did.

Jacob and the family arrive and God blesses them. However, in **verse 8** we start to see something ominous: none of these folks are growing any younger. If there’s one transition that every person must face this side of heaven, it’s our old foe: death. Deborah, Rebekah’s elderly nurse, dies – and she won’t be the last in this chapter. In that sense, her death sends a signal that even more transitions are coming...

35:9-15 In the midst of this stark reminder, the Lord once more appears to Jacob, this time reaffirming what happened so long ago: no longer shall Jacob be called by his birth name. Instead, he shall be called Israel, just as we read back in **chapter 32**. Much like with Abram to Abraham, the Lord uses the change in name to mark a transition – and in this case, a reminder: He had promised that generations would come forth from the family line of Jacob, and He will uphold that promise by His all-powerful strength. Jacob may feel small and vulnerable in the midst of stronger peoples and nations, but the Lord has promised that he and his shall not be wiped

out. To commemorate the Lord's care and appearance, Jacob sets up a pillar, using it like an altar to worship the God who is there, just as he had before.

Friends, God's promises don't expire. Sometimes, we struggle with how long ago all of this happened. It's been centuries since the events of the Gospels, and yet we are still awaiting Christ's return. Predictions have come and gone, and some folks are tempted to give up on the Lord, thinking that they are waiting in vain. It was little different in the times between the Old and New Testaments – many gave up on waiting for the Messiah then, too. Yet, centuries later, He came on the scene exactly and precisely as God had promised. And, of course, we see the same kind of waiting here: God had promised land, descendants, and His protection. While each of those promises has had some amount of fulfillment, none of them have been fully completed during Jacob's lifetime.

Let us learn from the struggles of those who came before us: they didn't wait in vain, even if many generations passed without seeing the Lord fulfill His promises. **Hebrews 11** reminds us of what is true: "These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth." We don't wait in vain either. Later in that same chapter of **Hebrews**, we read the reason for the waiting: "And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us..." Perhaps Christ will return this very week – what a wonderful day that would be! Perhaps He will tarry for decades and centuries to come. If so, know that His reasons are better than good, and that the call for you and I is the same as it has always been: trust the Lord, lean not on your own understanding, follow what Jesus has said. That is the work of the Christian life.

Those truths would be all the more crucial for Jacob's family with what comes next, which also provides us with a warning: it seems that God's people often run into real struggles whenever life goes too smoothly. We forget the Lord. Blessing turns into real spiritual danger as we grow lazy in our devotion to Jesus or take Him for granted. Our chapter closes by highlighting that very real danger...

35:16-29 Rachel, who so wanted children, has a second: to Joseph, we now add Ben-oni, whom Jacob calls Benjamin. Yet on this occasion that should have been a celebration, tragedy struck: Rachel died soon after childbirth. While Jacob's personal emotions aren't recorded for us, you don't have to try too hard to imagine what losing his beloved Rachel – the favorite of his wives – must have been like.

And Deborah's and Rachel's deaths won't be the only ones recorded in this chapter. After a record of the sons of the family – now numbering twelve – we come once more to Jacob's father, Isaac. Isaac has lived a long life – 180 years – and yet his days came to an end also. And then we read of more tragedy: Reuben commits incest with Bilhah. While he will eventually be judged for this, in the present we see how the spiritual victories of earlier in this chapter can quickly turn to curses when the people of God have too much time on their hands and perhaps a bit too much ease in their lives.

Dear church: beware of thinking that what we Christians need most is victory in the here and now. If history is any teacher, it is usually when Christians have it easy that we grow spiritually flabby. That's true on a personal level, when life is good and we tend to take our relationship with the Lord loosely; and it's true on the political and cultural levels, when we are lulled into thinking that if only the church had more power, more influence, more money, more wealth that everything would be better. It is during those times when God's people are often in great danger.

We began this chapter by speaking about change, about transition, and that's where I want to leave us today. The reality is that change is our constant companion this side of heaven. What are we to do with it? How are we to handle it?

The picture that we read of here shows one hope filled truth: God does not change. His promises don't fail, His care doesn't end, His protection doesn't falter, and His blessings never expire. While your lives and mine are constantly in flux, our faithful Savior is not. Do you want stability? Are you looking for hope? Then cling to the unchanging Lord. The Messiah who does not vary with the winds of time. The God who makes – and keeps! – His promises. He will do all He has said, and everyone found in Jesus will be eternally grateful for that! Let's pray...