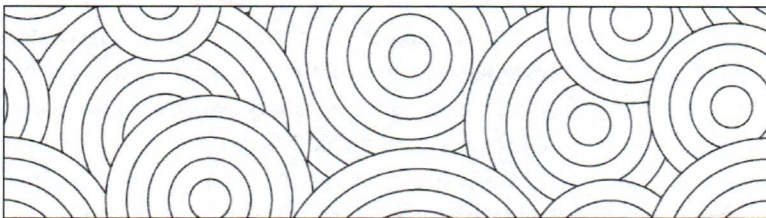


## LESSON 6

# JACOB AT BETHEL AGAIN

GENESIS 35:1-13



### OPEN IT UP

Some places are special for sentimental reasons. Maybe you return to the home where you spent your earliest years. Maybe you return to a vacation place that has been a highlight for your family. Maybe you return each summer to the same camp that holds so many fond memories. Whatever your special place is, emotions suddenly flood your heart when you return there. Bethel was such a place for Jacob. Bethel had spiritual associations in his life. This is the place where God appeared to him in a dream some fourteen years earlier, promising to guide him and help him as his personal God (Genesis 28:13–15). Now Jacob returns to Bethel where all those same feelings will return.

### AT GOD'S DIRECTION • GENESIS 35:1-4

As Jacob prepares to return to Bethel, he first calls his family to repentance. He commands them to “put away” their “foreign gods,” to “purify” themselves, and to “change” their clothes (Genesis 35:2). These are all signs of turning away from foreign lifestyles and false religions to embrace a true God. Notice Jacob assumed his family needed to correct errors *before* they approached God. Certainly,

when people wish to come to the Lord, they must purify their hearts and rid their lives of sin, resolving to live righteously (Acts 26:20; 2 Corinthians 12:21).

Having purified themselves of sin and false faiths, the family of Jacob was now prepared to enter Bethel. The name *Bethel* means “house of God,” and the very name indicates a sacred place. Therefore, Jacob was both excited and scared. What might happen if God noticed the false gods his family had brought out of their former country? Might his wives and children be destroyed? We generally think of worship as a ritual, but it is also a risk. Nadab and Abihu engaged God in unauthorized worship and lost their lives (Leviticus 10:1–3). Haggai explained that God’s goodness was withheld from the people because of false worship (Haggai 2:11–17). Paul was concerned that the Corinthians were in serious danger for their improper observance of the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 11:27–29). It is true that worship is a joyous opportunity, but it is also a solemn obligation.

This passage teaches that worship is an act of appreciation. Jacob states the reason for worship is to thank God for His protection, for he says, “God ... answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me in the way which I have gone” (Genesis 35:3). Worship is always an opportunity to return to God in a small way what He has done for us in such a great way. The Bible is filled with the notion that worship is a form of thanksgiving, although we rarely seem to emphasize this aspect of worship (e.g., Psalm 69:30; 100:4–5; Ephesians 5:19–20; Hebrews 10:28–29).

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### **AN ALTAR BUILT • GENESIS 35:5–8**

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God’s providential protection remained with Jacob as he journeyed throughout the land of Canaan. Scripture reports, “The terror of God was upon the cities that were all around them, and they did not pursue the sons of Jacob” (Genesis 35:5). The Bible reports this detail because it was so contrary to expectation. A large, unprotected family with tremendous wealth would be an easy target for local bandits. Yet God did not allow the peoples to assault Jacob and his family. A similar notion is conveyed by the famous words of the psalm: “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies” (Psalm

23:5). With God's protection, no matter how numerous or fierce the enemy, we will remain safe.

Jacob finally builds the altar and worships God in partial fulfillment of his earlier vow (Genesis 28:20–22). But Scripture suddenly switches to an unexpected topic—Jacob's mother. We recall how Jacob had been a bit of a “momma's boy” and certainly Rebekah's favorite son. Yet, for all the joy of reunion with his brother (chapter 33) and his father (35:27–29), there is no mention of his mother. The burial of Rebekah's nurse would be as close as Jacob would ever get to a reunion with his beloved mother (verse 8).

### **GOD BLESSES JACOB • GENESIS 35:9–13**

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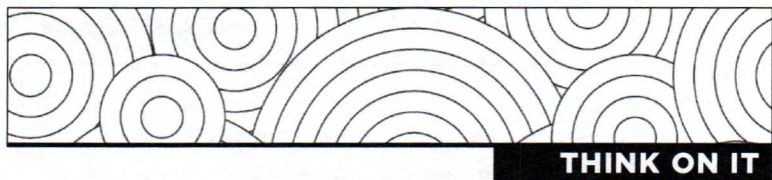
Jacob had stolen from Esau his fatherly blessing, but he waits many years before that blessing is confirmed by the Lord Himself. Perhaps God was waiting to see if Jacob proved himself worthy, or perhaps God was merely giving Jacob time to prepare for his inevitable future. Whatever the reason, the blessing is confirmed by a name change. Just as Abram's name was changed to Abraham (Genesis 17:5), Jacob's name is also changed to Israel. The angel who wrestled with Jacob had already declared the name (32:28); now God Himself confirms this detail (35:10). The name *Jacob* literally means “heel grabber,” and the modern equivalent is something like “subversive one.” The name *Israel*, however, means “he who strives.” Jacob's life was indeed a struggle. He struggled with Esau, his brother, even in the womb (25:22–23). He struggled with Laban, his father-in-law (31:41). He even struggled with God (32:28). Yet through his many struggles, God was preparing Jacob to be the father of the nation of Israel.

God extends the people promise offered to Abraham and Isaac: “Be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall proceed from you, and kings shall come from your body” (Genesis 35:11). God earlier spoke only of an innumerable multitude; now he speaks of rulers coming through the line of Jacob! Further, God reiterates the land promise: “To your descendants after you I give this land” (verse 12). Although Jacob himself would never live to see the promise realized, he could trust that God would provide his future family a people, a place, and a position of importance.

Once again, Jacob erects a “pillar” and pours “oil” and wine on it (Genesis 35:14). He thus repeats his earlier act (28:18). Jacob is apparently ignorant of the later Israelite law specifying the idolatrous nature of this act of worship (Leviticus 26:1; Deuteronomy 16:22). Still, it should be noted that neither Abraham nor Isaac do such a thing, and the first readers of Genesis, living at the time of Moses, would have found Jacob’s act objectionable. The detail may serve as a reminder that, although Jacob made much spiritual progress, he still had lots of room to grow.

**WRAP IT UP**

**J**acob's return to Bethel closes the loop on one of the strangest personal episodes in the Bible. Jacob flees home, lives abroad for twenty years enduring abuse, and finally returns. His life is one of struggles and challenges, yet he keeps working. Through constant effort, Jacob is finally able to receive the divine blessing and the family promise. As Christians, life may not always be easy for us. Yet none of us live lives that can be reduced to a year or a single moment. It is a life of faith that counts—a faith that does not abandon us in good times and a faith that bears us along in bad times.



1. List some special places in the Bible that might have held sentimental value for the first believers.
2. Discuss the role of repentance in the context of worship. Why do you think we tend to discuss repentance only in conversations about salvation? How should repentance be a constant part of our lives?
3. Why would Jacob have been so afraid to worship God without removing the idols from his family? How is worship both a responsibility and a risk? How is worship an expression of thanksgiving?
4. What does the name *Jacob* mean? What does the name *Israel* mean? What lessons do you think these names are designed to teach readers of Scripture?
5. Discuss how Jacob struggled in his life. Why did God allow him to struggle? What lessons can we learn from the struggles of life?