

“Living by Faith for the Long Haul” | Genesis 35 (He Who Wrestles with God: A Study of the Life of Jacob)

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(Small Group Discussion Questions on Page 7)

On Monday I took a day trip up to my old seminary just north of Boston. I had not been there for thirteen years. I also visited an old professor, David Wells, who now lives in a retirement village. Professor Wells already had the title emeritus when I was in school and was a towering figure in evangelicalism, having written important books like *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology*; *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams*; and *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision*.

As I drove around the streets of South Hamilton, and as I sat with Dr. Wells in his small living room, I was struck by the passage of time. The hard grind from one generation to the next was noticeable—on Dr. Wells face, on the campus, in me.

When I first arrived at seminary, I was 25 and as passionate about God and pastoral work as could be. I found myself reflecting while on this trip about what has transpired since. What has become of me since graduation? How might this dear professor be processing life so near the end?

There is a difference between how we feel about something when it's just a dream, or just beginning, and how we feel after we've actually done it for some time. People dream of law school, or moving to DC and working on the hill, of marriage and family, of pastoring. But to enter into these things, to see what they are really like and live in them over the passage of time, deepens our understanding of them in ways we could not have anticipated.

It is from this perspective of the passage of much time that we consider Jacob, in Genesis 35. The patriarch has come full circle, completed the heart of his journey. After decades away from home, he comes back to where he began, Bethel, Canaan, his father's house. Jacob will see things fade from his life—his beloved wife, Rachel, his father, Isaac. The chapter covers much time itself, and invites reflection on the big picture of Jacob's life. Looking at Jacob now, after the long journey under the leadership of God, we can ask, *what is the life of faith really like, according to someone who's lived it for the long haul?* Setting naivety and youthful passions aside, Jacob might answer by saying this life cannot be lived without **(1) Promise, (2) Presence, and (3) Purification**.

I. Promise: The Life of Faith Is Rooted in Promises Not Results

It is a feature of the lives of the patriarchs that is so pervasive, we forget how strange it is: *they all*—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob—must stabilize their lives according to promises, not results.

Abraham's life with God begins not with the gift of land and family, but the promise: *"Go from your country ... and Father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation"* (Gen 12:1-2).

Isaac, too: *"Sojourn [that means, don't possess now] in this land, and I will be with you and will bless you, for to you and your offspring I will give all these lands"* (Gen 26:3).

And our passage begins with God summoning Jacob back to where their relationship started, Bethel, and making promises that point to the future: *"A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body. The land that I have to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring"* (Gen 35:12-13).

These men die before the fulfillment of these promises. Abraham bought a small patch of the land for a burial plot. Jacob adds to this a piece of land outside Shechem where he pitched his tent (Gen 33:19).¹

The patriarchs "all died in faith," says the writer of Hebrews, 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 (Hebrews 11:13).

There are types of fulfillments they do experience, and joys, too. But to explain the life of faith by putting all our weight on results would be to get off on the wrong foot. The people of God learn to balance upon *faith in God's promises*, not *sight of their quick fulfillment*.

Even at 85, after such a life of faithfulness, my old seminary professor still has to live upon promise. His alone now, body bent, in need of a cane to walk. Certainly, Jesus' promises of wiping away every tear, of the end of pain, of the new body and new earth, of his return—these are not things Dr. Wells stands on as experience, but rather digs his heels into as *promise*.

This is challenging for us. Our world is marked by passion for the immediate, the here and now. We want video shorts, whole seasons of a show at our finger tips; we want our leaders to fix the world in a four-year term, our pastors to renew a city in a decade. To base life upon what might happen *after* death is a gamble few will take. The emotional skill to live a life marked by *waiting* for what God will do in the future feels unbearable.

The people of the Bible found it hard, too. Abram and Sarai couldn't wait for a child, so they used Hagar. Jacob could not wait for God to bless him, so he stole the blessing from his father. Israel, too, will grumble in the wilderness as they wait on God, going so far as to say they preferred enslavement in Egypt to freedom with God.

¹ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36* (Fortress Press), 529, notes that he bought the land for a hundred "*kesita*, an unknown but certainly very old measure of currency."

Challenging as this is, it is still the way of the people of God today, of Christians. “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom of Israel?” the disciples asked the resurrected Lord (Acts 1:6). Jesus answered, “It is not for you to know times or seasons” (Acts 1:7). They must live in anticipation of a promise, not by enjoying its immediate arrival.

We can suggest two ways, two techniques, that help the people of faith *live rooted in God’s promises*.

First, we recognize that God is not slow in fulfilling promises, but strategic in what he is doing. God is right on time in his work in the world and in us. In what feels like delay, we again and again see that God is actually at work. The waiting, the patience, the pain, turn out to be the tools God uses to shape us. Certainly, this was the case for Jacob.

Second, make use of repetition. Notice how often God *repeats* the same promises to the same people. At times important things are added, but in sum, God repeats again and again the same promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: *I will give you the land; I will give you offspring; through you all the peoples of the world will be blessed*. It’s repeated here, in 35: 11-12. This is not pedantic. It is salvific. The word of God is *living* and *active*, and to our fearful and forgetful minds, hearing it afresh is like adding helium to a deflating heart. Do you hear God’s promises to you often, daily?

I lived in England for a short time for graduate school, and part of that time was hard—I was lonely, homesick. And I had to sit for an exam in theological German. To help prepare, I decided to memorize Psalm 23 in German. I wrote it on a card and recited it everywhere I walked. I can still hear the small stones crunching under my shoes as I walked the gardens paths behind Newnham College, on my way to Tyndale House Library, saying again and again:

*Der HERR ist mein Hirte; mir wird nichts mangeln.
Er weidet mich auf grüner Aue,
und führet mich zum frischen Wasser*

“The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside still waters”
(Ps 23:1-2).

The promises of the Psalm became to me green pastures and still waters. I repeated them again and again and again.

That’s the first thing to tell you about what it’s really like to live the life of faith. The people of God live upon immediate results, they live upon the promises of God.

But this is not to say that we are without our consolations in this life, or without experiences and joys here and now. Which brings us to our second feature of the life of faith, *Presence*.

II. Presence: *The Life of Faith Rests in the Presence and Protection of the Promise Maker.*

Text: The most important of God's promises is the one that's immediately answered, the promise, "*I am with you.*" This he says to Jacob the first time he speaks to him in Genesis 28, the first encounter at Bethel: "*Behold, I am with you.*" He adds, "I will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you" (Gen 28:15).

This introduces us to an important feature of God's promises—they come in differing scope. Some are for the far-off future, such as when God promises that through Abraham every family of the earth will be blessed. Some are for the not-so-distant future, such as when God promises Jacob that he will bring him back to Bethel, which assumes a fulfillment in Jacob's lifetime. And other promises have immediate and ongoing fulfillment, such as the promise, "*I am with you.*"

That Jacob has experienced the fulfillment of this promise is evident in his words in verse 3, "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* (present tense) and *has been with me wherever I have gone* (past tense)." Jacob has tasted fulfillments, and this is important for building his faith in the promises that still involve waiting. Let's consider what's he experienced already.

Jacob says he will "build an altar to the God who answers me in the day of my distress" (35:3). This looks back to a prayer he made when terrified that Esau was coming to kill him and his family with his four hundred men:

Jacob said to God, "Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, that he may come and attack me, the mothers with the children" (Gen 32:11).

God softens the heart of Esau. Instead of bloodshed, the wronged brother runs to Jacob, embraces, hugs, and kisses him (Gen 33:4).²

Jacob also begins to realize that God was with him each step of the way, "wherever I have gone," (35:3). From his deathbed, Jacob will speak of the constancy of God's presence with the imagery of the pastoralist:

The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day (Gen 48:15).

² As the Proverb Reads: "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will (Prov 21:1, KJV); The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will (Prov 21:1, ESV).

God is always with us. Always watching. Always protecting. John Calvin says of Jacob's words, "The providence of God watches for our salvation, even when it seems to sleep."³ There were times when Jacob may have doubted God's presence: when he deceived his father; when he was being deceived by Laban; when a few days in Paddan Aram turned into twenty years. Surely God could not have been with him in these moments?

But now, looking back, he sees His hand everywhere: "God has been with me wherever I have gone" (35:3).

Often, God's presence in our lives will only be discernable when looking back—sometimes not until the vantage point of eternity. But he is with us, always.

It takes time and skill to recognize the presence of God with us. It's not usually a thunder clap, but more often a subtle voice or presence (as Elijah learned, 1 Kings 19:12).

I have been reflecting this week on my life since those years at seminary. How has God been with me? I did some journaling about this, and noticed that several seasons have unfolded since seminary, and that each one—including seminary—was marked by the provision of incredible friendships. Really, everywhere I have gone, God has surrounded me with the most remarkable Christian brothers and sisters. This has been a joy to my heart, a source of laughter, a source of encouragement and support. And when I think of the rest of my life, I really have no fear about whether or not God will be with me.

"The physical presence of other Christians," wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer."⁴

Do you know that the provision of other Christians is one way God cares for us and is with us? Jesus taught that those who follow him are his family and friends: "whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:35). "No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends..." (John 15:14-15).

When you follow him, you too get new family and friends. They, too, are filled with the Holy Spirit. Their presence in your life is one way Jesus conveys his presence with you. There are many other ways Jesus conveys his presence to us: by his Spirit dwelling in our hearts (Rom 8:9-10, 16), by his Spirit speaking to us through His Word, even by the gifts of creation that enfold us.

He was there in a circumstance, in an open or closed door, in the laughter, in the kindness, in the rebuke, of a friend. But "Nothing," Paul writes, will "separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38).

³ Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, 232.

⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*.

Sum: That is our second point: *those who walk the long path of faith, come to know the presence of their Lord in their lives, and it is a presence that gives rest, and that protects from evil* (not from every pain, but from the evil that would finally destroy our hearts).

III. Purification: *The Life of Faith Seeks Purification, even while Living in Cana.*

Finally, notice that Jacob's return home is not an entry into Eden nor heaven. The marks of sin and curse are threefold: *surrounding culture, family brokenness, and death.*

The surrounding culture of the Canaanites is a threat to godliness (in Gen 34 the men of the land defile Jacob's daughter, Dinah). There will be always be tension between being annihilated or assimilated by the surrounding culture (in Gen 34, the Canaanites want to intermarry with Jacob's family—suggesting assimilation).

There is the continual brokenness of Jacob's family. In verse 22, Reuben, Jacob's first born, sleeps with Bilhah, his father's concubine. Bilhah was Rachel's servant whom she encouraged Jacob to have children with when she was barren. This was an act on Reuben's part probably for power—asserting himself as first born.

And it is striking how the note of death sounds throughout our passage: "Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, dies and is buried" (35:8). Rachel, Jacob's beloved, dies in childbirth (35:18-19). And finally, Jacob's father, Isaac, dies and is buried by Jacob and Esau (35:29).

Jacob has come home to the promised land, but the curse is far from lifted.

In light of these circumstances, the people of God must *purify themselves*—meaning, set themselves apart for the Lord, even while living in the land of Canaan. Jacob, having matured during his sojourn, leads his family in doing so:

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 garment..." 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 (35:2, 4).

The central issue for the people of God is not physical location, but spiritual purification. Location has its impact. Some cultures, some schools, some places, are harder to be in than others. But the real challenge is to peel from our hearts the idols—things we love more than God—and to devote ourselves entirely to the Lord. This is something we need to do afresh, every day.

Jacob's life is an example to us. It shows us that God's promises do not fail: God does bring Jacob home; God is his shepherd all the days of his life. And despite the failings of Jacob and his family, one of Jacob's sons, Judah, continues the line that stretches down through David, to Mary, to Jesus. Enfolded Jacob's story is the seed that is the Salvation of the World, Jesus Christ.

The saints of the New Testament, Christians, see more than the saints of the Old. We know Jesus. We have the promise of forgiveness of sins. We see better how God is bringing the blessing of Abraham's family to the whole world.

But we still must walk the long road of faith: *holding fast to God's Promises, learning to rest in His Presence, and purifying ourselves for his service.*

Professor Wells, learning to live alone for the first time after decades of marriage, said that he wakes up quite early these days, 4am. But he spends the first two hours of his morning with the Lord: reading his Bible, praying, worshiping. He said, with a smile on his face, that it is a sweet fellowship he has with the Lord, and that without that, "I don't know how I'd make it."

Friends, we, the descendants of Jacob, those brought into the people of God in Jesus Christ, we live this life of faith, trusting always in God. And as all other things fade away, loved ones, the energies and efforts of our own lives, there is one thing that remains: Our Good Shepherd. Our Lord. He, we will never be without.

Discussion Questions

1. How do you know if the promises of God, are promises for you? Consider 2 Corinthians 1:20, where Paul says that "all the promises of God find their Yes in Christ." Are you in Christ?
2. Name two or three promises of God that are important to you. How to you live rooted in these?
3. Many of Jacob's family die when he comes back to Canaan—Deborah, Rachel, Isaac. How does the world deal with the fact of death? How do Christians deal with it differently?
4. Jacob says that God has "been with him wherever he has gone" (Gen 35:3). How have you sensed and seen God's presence in your life? Are there times when you felt he was absent, but upon looking back, see how he was working and with you?
5. Jacob calls his family to purify themselves before they go up to Bethel to make an altar (Gen 35:2-4). What are two or three things Christians today must purify themselves from if they are to be God's light in a dark world.