

## Return to Bethel – Genesis 35

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### **GENESIS 35:1-4**

At the beginning of this chapter, we see Jacob at a pivotal moment in his life. While the Bible doesn't explicitly state that he's spiritually adrift, it would seem there is a need for spiritual renewal. As such, God instructs him to go to Bethel, and to settle there. You might remember the name Bethel from Genesis chapter 28. It was there that Jacob experienced a profound encounter with God.

As I was reading this chapter, I was reminded how important revival can be. In Revelation 2:4-5 we read, "You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place."

I imagine there are a lot of people who have felt that way at times. They realize that they've come to a place in their life where their relationship with God has grown stale. My family wasn't always of the Christian faith, in fact I was 11 years old when our family came to Christ. And so, I remember those early days well when our excitement for Jesus filled the air. We went

to church four times a week, had home Bible studies in our basement and told everyone we could about the new faith that we found.

Over time, I've gone through a few seasons when the intensity of my faith has waned. I didn't feel the spark like I use to. I didn't sense the excitement within me. And there were times when I chose my own path, ignoring God's lead. With all of its twists and turns and distractions, life can dim the light we once had if we let it, but we're always left with a choice: continue to wander without direction or reignite the spark we once had.

Notice Jacob's decisive action when he instructs his household to purify



themselves and put away their foreign gods. We find a similar account in Exodus when God said to Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes." (Exodus 19:10)

In Genesis 35:1, Jacob's family is getting ready to go to Bethel. Once again, the name Bethel means "house of God." And so, we see a parallel here to our spiritual readiness as we prepare to enter God's house.

Revelation 22:14 emphasizes the importance of purification by saying, "Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by its gates."

What does this look like in the life of a believer? It starts by turning to God in repentance, asking Him to forgive us for any behaviors or thoughts that have pulled us away from Him. And, in the same way that Jacob did, we make a deliberate effort to remove the things that hinder our relationship with God. This might include things like:

- Refraining from using harsh or vulgar language, choosing words that reflect the goodness of God instead.
- Withdrawing from peer groups that encourage ungodly behavior, seeking fellowship with those who inspire growth in Christ.
- Keeping a check on pride, remembering that humility is valued in the eyes of the Lord.
- Choosing music and entertainment that uplifts rather than corrupts our spirit.
- Engaging with social media responsibly and avoiding its use as a ground for sin or negativity.
- Participating in conversations that build up rather than tear down.
- Avoiding substance abuse or any behavior that harms the body, which is the temple of the Holy Spirit.

This isn't about legalism or earning favor with God, but about creating a life that honors Him and is sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. This is what Paul is talking about when he says, “let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.” If we want a revival, it's time to start asking ourselves what sin we're still holding onto. Search your heart to find out what's holding you back, and then bury those sins at the foot of the cross.

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*So they gave Jacob all the foreign gods they had  
and the rings in their ears, and Jacob buried them  
under the oak at Shechem.  
– Genesis 35:4, NIV*

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⊕ What does the word purify mean in relation to our spiritual life?

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⊕ According to 1 John 1:7-9, what purifies us? And what part do we have in this purification process?

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## GENESIS 35:5-8

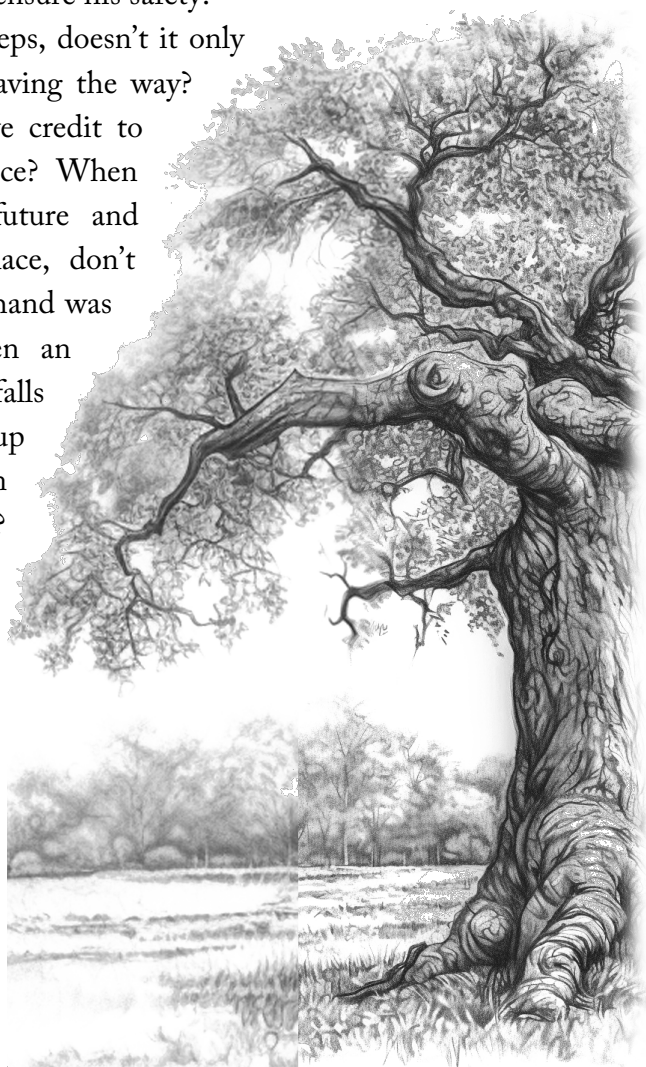
Looking back at the end of the last chapter we see Jacob's concern for his family's safety: "You have brought trouble on me by making me obnoxious to the Canaanites and Perizzites, the people living in this land. We are few in number, and if they join forces against me and attack me, I and my household will be destroyed."

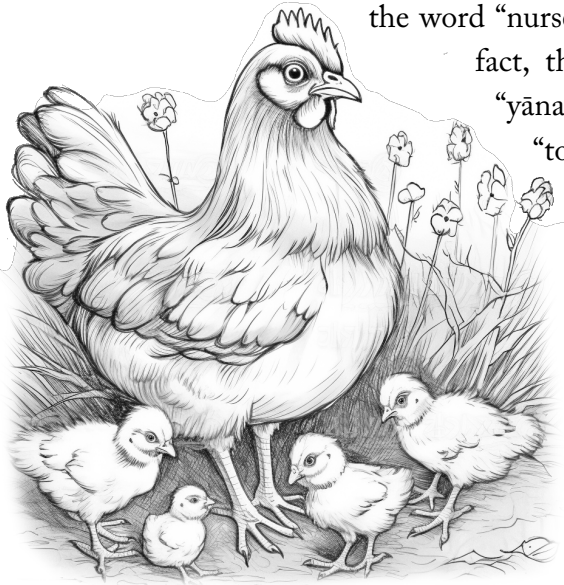
However, in this chapter we read, "Then they set out, and the terror of God fell on the towns all around them so that no one pursued them." (Genesis 35:5) What we're seeing here once again, is the Lord going before Jacob to prepare the way and ensure his safety.

If God is planning our steps, doesn't it only make sense that He's also paving the way?

How many times do we give credit to luck, chance, or happenstance? When you're worried about the future and things suddenly fall into place, don't overlook the fact that God's hand was at work in your life. When an opportunity miraculously falls into your lap, don't chalk it up to luck. The Bible says, "In everything give thanks." Why? Because every high and low is designed with purpose, and nothing happens outside of His will.

In Genesis 35:8, we read about Rebekah's nurse Deborah. She was first mentioned in Genesis chapter 24 when she left with Rebekah and so she's been with Jacob for many years. In the Biblical context,





the word “nurse” typically refers to a wet nurse. In fact, the Hebrew word for nurse here is “yānaq” (Strong’s H3243) which means “to give suck.”

Perhaps the reason that her passing is mentioned here is that it may be seen as symbolically reflecting the spiritual maturity that Jacob undergoes in his journey with God. This moment can be likened to the maturation process described in Hebrews 5:13-14, where the transition from milk to solid food represents

the progression from a basic understanding of Christian principles to a deeper, more discerning engagement with God's Word. Remember how in the first line of this book I said, “put away your spoons, ladies, and pick up our forks?” This is what I was referring to—a movement from basic elementary teaching to a deeper understanding of God's Word.

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*Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.*

*—Hebrews 5:13–14, NIV*

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As he buries Deborah near Bethel, where he has again encountered God and reaffirmed his commitment, it is as though he is burying his former self, marked by deception and strife, and fully stepping into his role as Israel—a prince with God. This act reflects a spiritual maturity, where he no longer sees God merely as a provider to be bargained with but recognizes Him as "God of the house of God," (El Bethel) acknowledging God's sovereign place in his life and his own role in God's ongoing covenant with his ancestors.



What are some ways we can cultivate a deeper awareness of God's presence in our lives, even in the midst of our challenges?

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Why do you think Jacob called the place El Bethel when he previously named it Bethel?

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Look at Hebrews 5:13–14 in context. What do the verses just before it say about the people it was directed to?

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**GENESIS 35:9-15**

In Genesis 35:9, we’re told that God appeared to Jacob again after he returned from Paddan Aram. This doesn’t mean that Jacob returned to Paddan Aram after making a covenant with Laban in which Jacob vowed that he wouldn’t return. Instead, it’s referring to the broader context in which Jacob had previously lived in Paddan Aram, and then departed from there with his family.

Genesis 35:14 of this chapter says, “Jacob set up a stone pillar at the place where God had talked with him, and he poured out a drink offering on it; he also poured oil on it.” In the Old Testament, drink offerings were often offered in conjunction with animal sacrifices or grain offerings as an act of worship and dedication to God. The pouring out of the drink offering symbolized the pouring out of one’s life or resources to God as an act of devotion and surrender. For example, Numbers 15:5 states: "With each lamb for the burnt offering or the sacrifice, prepare a quarter of a hin of wine as a drink offering."

In the New Testament, Paul sheds light on the symbolism when he refers to his ministry and service to God as a drink offering: "But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you." (Philippians 2:17)

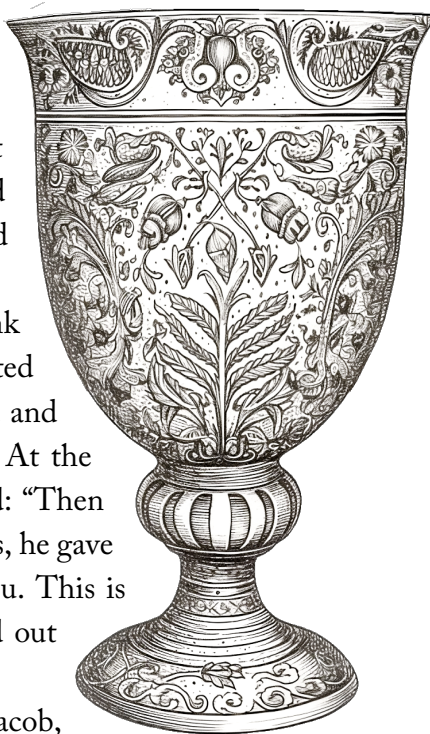
Of course, there was no greater drink offering than Jesus Himself who demonstrated the depth of His love and devotion to God and humanity through His death on the cross. At the Last Supper in Matthew 26:27-28, we read: "Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.'"

As we close the chapter on the life of Jacob, we find a pause in his story. Although Jacob's life continues, this point marks a significant moment of completion and fulfillment in his spiritual journey. At Bethel, Jacob's experiences come full circle — from his first encounter with God at Bethel to his return as a family leader who, like Paul, was ready to pour out his life in service to God.

Now we transition from Jacob to his son with "The Life of Joseph: A Type of Christ" (a Bible study you can find on my website), where we continue to explore the unfolding of God's salvation plan. The study of Joseph extends the story of God's work through Jacob's family, drawing parallels to the life and redemptive work of Christ.

At this concluding point in our story, let's consider the rich symbolism found in Jacob's actions at Bethel:

"The oil poured on the pillar in the past was a picture of the Spirit resting upon Jesus in preparation for His work... Now Jacob pours both a drink offering and then oil on the pillar. This then is a picture of His death on the cross and His resurrection by the



return of the Spirit to Him. All the work has been fulfilled and we can see the circle is complete in this act." (thesuperiorword.com)

It is here at Bethel, a place of God's promised presence, that a sense of completion surrounds Jacob's story. Though not the end of his life, it's a milestone that invites reflection on the journey thus far and on the journey yet to come.



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❓ In Genesis Chapter 28, Jacob anointed the stone with oil. In this chapter, however, he is pouring both a drink offering and oil over the stone. Why do you think this is?

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① The oil poured over the pillar can be seen as a picture of the Spirit resting upon Jesus. Can you find that in the New Testament? If so, describe what was happening.

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② As you reflect back on this study of Jacob, were there any particular insights or revelations that stood out to you?

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# Answer Key

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## Chapter 11 – Genesis 35

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### GENESIS 35:1-4

**What does the word purify mean in relation to our spiritual life?**

To "purify" means to cleanse from sin or impurity, aligning one's life with God's holy standards.

**According to 1 John 1:7-9, what purifies us? And what part do we have in this purification process?**

The blood of Jesus Christ purifies us from all sin. This purification is made effective through His sacrificial death, which cleanses believers from the guilt and power of sin. Our part in this process involves walking in the light (living righteously)—as God is righteous—ensuring open and honest fellowship with others, and confessing our sins.

### GENESIS 35:5-8

**What are some ways we can cultivate a deeper awareness of God's presence in our lives, even in the midst of our challenges?**

- Prayer: Regular communication with God through prayer enhances our awareness of His presence and reaffirms His control over our circumstances.
- Scripture Reading: Immersing ourselves in the Bible helps us understand God's character and promises, which strengthens our trust in His sovereignty.

- **Worship:** Participating in worship, both individually and with church groups, redirects our focus from our problems to God's greatness and faithfulness.

**Why do you think Jacob called the place El Bethel when he previously named it Bethel?**

Jacob renaming the place El Bethel from Bethel represents a deepening of his personal relationship with God. Initially, "Bethel" or "House of God" was named to commemorate the place where God appeared to him during his flight from Esau. When Jacob returned, he named it "El Bethel," which means "God of the House of God." This renaming of Bethel signifies a shift from merely recognizing a place where God is known, to an active engagement with God.

**Look at Hebrews 5:13–14 in context. What do the verses just before it say about the people it was directed to?**

The writer addresses the recipients of the letter as those who have become "dull of hearing." Despite the time they have had to learn and grow in their faith, they are described as needing someone to teach them again the basic principles of God's word.

## **GENESIS 35:9-15**

**In Chapter 28, Jacob anointed the stone with oil. In this chapter, however, he is pouring both a drink offering and oil over the stone. Why do you think this is?**

When Jacob anointed the stone with oil in Genesis 28, it symbolically acknowledged Christ as the pathway to heaven, reminiscent of the beginning of Christ's ministry when the Spirit descended upon Him and God proclaimed Him as His Son.

Later, in Genesis 35, when Jacob pours both oil and a drink offering over the stone, it not only continues to point to Christ—whose life was poured out on the cross—but also reflects Jacob's own readiness to dedicate his life in service to God.

This evolution in Jacob's actions from using just oil to including a drink offering points us to Christ, who poured out His life on the cross.

**The oil poured over the pillar can be seen as a picture of the Spirit resting upon Jesus. Can you find that in the New Testament? If so, describe what was happening.**

In Matthew 3:16, after Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, He came up out of the water, and the heavens were opened. Then the Spirit of God descended like a dove and alighted on Him. This moment marked the beginning of Jesus' public ministry and symbolized the anointing of the Holy Spirit upon Him.

**As you reflect back on this study of Jacob, were there any particular insights or revelations that stood out to you?**

(This answer will be different for everyone)