

GENESIS—WEEK 29

WELCOME TO THE SCHOOL OF HARD
KNOCKS, ISRAEL



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is Joseph tells his dreams to Jacob by Lucas van Leyden
(1494–1533) on display at Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam*

No sooner does Jacob embrace his new identity as Israel than he gets hit with crushing trials.

If he was thinking that the life of faith is a cakewalk, he's cured of that nonsense.

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T. M. Moore, Principal
tmmoore@ailbe.org

Thank you.

Genesis 35:9–37:24 — Welcome to the School of Hard Knocks, Israel
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1 Genesis 35:9–15 (NKJV)

Then God appeared to Jacob again, when he came from Padan Aram, and blessed him. And God said to him, “Your name is Jacob; your name shall not be called Jacob anymore, but Israel shall be your name.” So He called his name Israel. Also God said to him: “I am God Almighty. Be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall proceed from you, and kings shall come from your body. The land which I gave Abraham and Isaac I give to you; and to your descendants after you I give this land.” Then God went up from him in the place where He talked with him. So Jacob set up a pillar in the place where He talked with him, a pillar of stone; and he poured a drink offering on it, and he poured oil on it. And Jacob called the name of the place where God spoke with him, Bethel.

This feels like an epilogue for the odyssey that Jacob has been on for the last few decades (though the drama in his life is just getting going). Recall the promise Jacob made at the beginning.

And he called the name of that place Bethel; but the name of that city had been Luz previously. Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going, and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on, so that I come back to my father’s house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God. And this stone which I have set as a pillar shall be God’s house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You.” — Genesis 28:19-22 (NKJV)

It’s time for Jacob to keep his promise.

Instead, God trumps everything when He declares that Jacob gets the land reserved for Abraham and Isaac. He reiterates Jacob’s new name, and this time it becomes the name Jacob uses. *Israel shall be your name*. His identity change is complete. From here on, Israel is who he is.

The rest of the Old Testament will follow Israel and his descendants (not counting the book of Job, which was written earlier).

God’s goal isn’t incremental changes and small bits of growth (though he uses those things). He wants radical change. Jacob’s new name is an example of that. Our rebirth in Christ is another.

We tend to memorize this without learning it. We pray for simple favors like, “Heal my knee,” or, “Help me solve my problem,” but please don’t make waves. We don’t want our lives transformed.

This is nothing more or less than a lack of courage and commitment. We aren’t willing to let go of what we have and what’s comfortable in order to launch into the unknown of full service to Christ. We do commendable things in His service, but it’s all safely fenced in. (Note: I’m guilty of this too.)

The key isn’t to throw everything away and head off to some foreign country. The key is to pray boldly about God’s leading. He may tell you become a foreign missionary—or He may not.

Pray like you mean it.

2 Genesis 35:16–29 (ESV)

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

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. The sons of Leah: Reuben (Jacob's firstborn), Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun. The sons of Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin. The sons of Bilhah, Rachel's servant: Dan and Naphtali. The sons of Zilpah, Leah's servant: Gad and Asher. These were the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Paddan-aram.

And Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre, or Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had sojourned. Now the days of Isaac were 180 years. 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.

No sooner has Jacob completed his transformation into Israel than his whole world comes crashing down all around him. He loses the love of his life, his firstborn son sins massively against him, and he loses his dad. He gets hit from all sides. This isn't random; it's how God develops his servants.

His goal is to transform us, not to baby us. We get babied when we need babying, and taught when we're ready to learn. As soon as Jacob is prepared for real growth, big challenges hit. He's being refined by fire.

This is the model for life in Christ. Note this well: when you pray for God to protect you from trials, you are, in a sense, asking to be taken out of the game. Don't get me wrong—we're not supposed to look for trouble—but we're in a war, and our job is to serve the King. Real saints make real sacrifices. It isn't required that you suffer for Christ, but it's the norm.

This view of life in Christ is what inspired St. Patrick to invent Green Martyrdom. Unable to literally shed their blood for their Lord, Patrick and the other Irish saints shed virtually everything else. They lived only for Christ, and many believe that this actually saved civilization.

<http://thomascahill.com/books/how-the-irish-saved-civilization-tr>

St. Patrick didn't set out to save civilization. He just felt called to do the right thing—beginning with returning to his former slave-master. One thing led to another, and he ended up spearheading a revival that lasted 400 years.

And he was a total nobody. He just followed the LORD's leading, and God did the rest.

Any one of us can be just as great as Patrick. All we have to do is follow God without reservation.

3 Genesis 36:1–5, 40–43 (ESV)

These are the generations of Esau (that is, Edom). Esau took his wives from the Canaanites: Adah the daughter of Elon the Hittite, Oholibamah the daughter of Anah the daughter of Zibeon the Hivite, and Basemath, Ishmael's daughter, the sister of Nebaioth. And Adah bore to Esau, Eliphaz; Basemath bore Reuel; and Oholibamah bore Jeush, Jalam, and Korah. These are the sons of Esau who were born to him in the land of Canaan.

... (Though too long to fit here, this entire section should be read.)

These are the names of the chiefs of Esau, according to their clans and their dwelling places, by their names: the chiefs Timna, Alvah, Jetheth, Oholibamah, Elah, Pinon, Kenaz, Teman, Mibzar, Magdiel, and Iram; these are the chiefs of Edom (that is, Esau, the father of Edom), according to their dwelling places in the land of their possession.

It is difficult for modern Americans to relate to these detailed genealogies. That's because we live in a multi-racial, constitutional republic. To us, a nation is a land with a constitutional government.

But that's not how things used to be. The Greek word for "nation" in the New Testament is *ethnos*. Long ago, nations were not republics, nor even specific areas of land; they were ethnic groups. A racially diverse nation was a contradiction in terms. That's still true in many parts of the world. Think about that the next time you hear that the Kurds want to have a separate Kurdistan.

In an ancient society, where few people can read and almost all news is local, most of what you know came from your parents and grandparents. If they tell you things beyond what they were eyewitnesses to, that will mainly be things they learned from their relatives. Thus, the history you knew would mostly be the history of your family—and much of that would be genealogy.

Thus, these genealogies have a significance we can't fully relate to. Israelite genealogies weren't just interesting; they were essential. They told you who you are. They explained who is king and why. They told you whom you're supposed to like and whom you're supposed to be at war with.

They governed your life.

History isn't just for entertainment; it explains things. We live in an independent nation. But why? How?

Because we declared it on July 4, 1776, and because Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown.

Similarly, Genesis is all about how we got here. For its original audience, genealogies are a big part of that. Please read all of Genesis 36, and do it as if it's directly important to you—especially the parts about the kings and chiefs. Try to capture the feeling you'd have if it were about, say, the battle of Yorktown—or something else where everything would be different now if it hadn't turned out the way it did.

Whether you're thinking of your ancestors or of Yorktown, praise God that we made it.

4 Genesis 37:1–11 (ESV)

Jacob lived in the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan. These are the generations of Jacob.

Joseph, being seventeen years old, was pasturing the flock with his brothers. He was a boy with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives. And Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was the son of his old age. And he made him a robe of many colors. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him.

Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more. He said to them, "Hear this dream that I have dreamed: Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf." His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us?" So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words.

Then he dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers and said, "Behold, I have dreamed another dream. Behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me." But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him and said to him, "What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow ourselves to the ground before you?" And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind.

We know where this is heading. "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good," — Genesis 50:20a (ESV).

But it's amazing how nuanced this will get. Every player has a sin that contributes a key piece. Jacob's favoritism towards Joseph is wrong and badly executed to boot. What was he thinking when he gave Joseph that robe? Every parent knows not to do things like this and wouldn't want to anyway.

Joseph's brothers then react especially sinfully. The Hebrew idiom translated as, "could not speak peacefully with him," is severe. Then Joseph shoots off his mouth about his dreams in a way that's so over the top it even offends Jacob. This also takes his brothers' jealousy up a notch—to a dangerous level.

The stage is set.

This is a brief account of a long sequence of events. The friction between Joseph and his brothers didn't spring up overnight because of a coat and a couple of dreams; it's been brewing for years.

We're all sinful, and we all have issues that have been brewing for years. The key is resentment. The things we resent are fertile ground for the enemy. Is there some resentment in your heart that you need to get on top of? You can't do it alone.

Ask the LORD to free you of those chains.

5 Genesis 37:12-24 (ESV)

Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." And he said to him, "Here I am." So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock, and bring me word." So he sent him from the Valley of Hebron, and he came to Shechem. And a man found him wandering in the fields. And the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" "I am seeking my brothers," he said. "Tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." And the man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan.

They saw him from afar, and before he came near to them they conspired against him to kill him. They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits. Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what will become of his dreams." But when Reuben heard it, he rescued him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." And Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but do not lay a hand on him"—that he might rescue him out of their hand to restore him to his father. So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the robe of many colors that he wore. And they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

Jacob's growing relationship with the LORD doesn't prevent this dreadful conspiracy. That's just chilling. All Christians long to see their faith transmitted to loved ones, especially their children. Imagine things in your family going this badly! If Jacob had found out about what his sons were up to, it might have killed him—literally.

We aren't given many specifics about how Jacob modeled his new found faith for his family (other than clearing out all the foreign gods), but they must have seen the altars and other things he built for the LORD. Surely, they were also told of the covenant blessings they're heir to. It's just gut-wrenching to think how totally ineffective that was. His sons are truly evil at this point (except for Reuben, who plots to save Joseph).

This great sin sets up a great repentance. That's how Jacob's faith does, eventually, get transmitted to his sons. Funny how that works.

Jacob's failure to transmit his faith to his kids while they were young becomes the foundation of how it's transmitted so effectively and completely in the end.

As Genesis keeps illustrating, we can't control others' faith. Still, we are called to pray for our unbelieving loved ones. Our prayers glorify God, and He honors them—though His timing can be intriguing.

Take heart; as discouraging as some situations are, they can't be worse than what these boys were up to.

Almost everyone's path to faith is a glorious "come from behind" miracle.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Are you afraid to give God carte blanche and pray for Him to change everything?
2. In times of great trial, how should our prayers be different?
3. What is your favorite “plot twist” in history?
4. Do you struggle with resentment?
5. Did your path to faith have some incredible twists and turns?