

“GOD’S GRACE TO DISAPPOINTING PEOPLE”

This passage divides into two main sections: the part that describes Jacob’s journey to Bethel and the covenant renewal that took place there; and the part that describes Jacob’s journey from Bethel to Hebron, the place where his father Isaac was living. It is a chapter of transition, a transition made evident by several deaths and by the shift in focus from Jacob to his sons. Jacob remains alive until the very end of the book, but after this chapter he ceases to be the principle character. The mantle is being passed from Jacob to the next generation, and as this transition takes place, our attention is once again drawn to the fact that these people are not the kind of people that we would hope that the covenant people would be. As God’s plan to build up his covenant community continues to unfold, we are reminded that the material that God is working with is not very promising.

As Jacob noted at the end of the previous chapter, the ruthless massacre that was carried out by his sons Simeon and Levi put Jacob’s family in danger. There were not very many of them, at least not enough to feel secure from the threat of attack from the peoples around them. The Shechemites surely had allies in the area, and it would not be very difficult for them to avenge their fallen neighbors. But once again we see God’s grace to Jacob, as he speaks to him and reminds him of the vow that he had made over twenty years ago, the vow to return to Bethel and worship the Lord there. As we saw in last week’s sermon, it was Jacob’s failure to return to Bethel that got him into this mess with the Shechemites. Jacob paid a large price for that act of disobedience, but God did

not abandon his covenant people, even though they had committed a horrific crime in deceiving and massacring Shechem and his people. By calling Jacob to Bethel, the Lord protected him from the retaliation that might have been directed against him.

As you look at the words that God spoke to Jacob when he called him to Bethel, I want to call your attention to the fact that God commanded him to build an altar there. This is something that we have seen repeatedly in the book of Genesis. Noah built an altar when the Lord brought him out of the ark. Abraham built altars at Shechem, between Bethel and Ai, at Hebron, and at Moriah. Isaac built an altar at Beersheba. And Jacob himself had built one when he was at Shechem. All of this altar-building teaches us a very important lesson, a lesson that today's Christians especially need to be reminded of. It shows us that, in the Bible, the worship of the Lord is expressed outwardly and visibly. It is not merely an internal matter, a matter of the heart. Contemporary Christians need to be reminded of this, because we have a tendency to think that it is only the internal and private aspect of our relationship with God that matters. Ours is the age of private, individualistic religion. There are many people today who think of themselves as Christians but who are not members of a local church. And there are even more who consider themselves Christians but do not even attend church on a regular basis. This is a real problem. Of course it is true that external worship means nothing to God when a person's heart is not in it. A person could come to worship faithfully for years and still not enjoy true communion with God. God is not pleased with worship that is purely external. But this does not mean that we can do away with the

external aspects of religion. God wants us to worship him externally and internally. Biblical religion has always found expression in outward forms, whether it be in the setting up of altars, in the temple service and the sacrificial system, or in the meeting together of New Testament saints for worship on the Lord's Day. Biblical religion is not a purely private and individualistic matter. God did not command Jacob to go to Bethel and have a time of private devotions there. He told him to go and build an altar there.

But in order for Jacob and his family to be able to worship the Lord at Bethel, they needed to be purified. And this remains true today. No one can approach the Lord in worship and find acceptance with him without being purified from our sins. This is why our worship must be Christ-centered. We can only worship the Lord through faith in Christ's blood. In the same way, if Jacob and his family were going to worship God acceptably at Bethel, they would need to be purified from their sin. And they definitely needed purification. It was not just Dinah who was defiled during their time in Shechem. As we saw last week, they were all guilty, whether it was through their sins of omission or their sins of commission. Furthermore, Jacob's family had gotten tangled up with idolatry. And this is not all that surprising. We have already seen a number of indicators that Jacob's family were involved in idolatrous practices: there was the time when Jacob tried to manipulate the breeding process of Laban's animals by peeling bark from sticks; there was the time when Rachel and Leah were gathering mandrakes, a plant that was believed to produce fertility; and there was the time when Rachel stole her father's household gods. Whatever idols they were worshipping, Jacob now saw that those idols

would have to go. The Lord requires the exclusive devotion of his people, as the first of the ten commandments makes clear: “You shall have no other gods before me.”

We should take note of the fact that idolatry was able to work its way into the life of the covenant family. Jacob and his family were believers in the one true God, yet they struggled with idolatry. This serves as a warning to us, a reminder of the fact that we all have a propensity for idolatry. As Calvin famously said, the human heart is an idol-making factory. And we need to remember that idolatry is not limited to making statues and bowing down to them. Biblical scholar Gregory Beale says that “Idol worship is anything that is a substitute for the worship of God.” [*We Become What We Worship*, 285] Anything can be an idol. The apostle Paul says that covetousness is idolatry, and he can say this because covetousness is worshipping your own will, your own desires. One of our culture’s most dominant idols is the idol of entertainment, making fun and pleasure the measure of everything else, including God.

After setting aside their idols, Jacob and his family travel to Bethel, and God protects them on the way. Remember, Jacob was in danger. There was a real possibility of retaliation for the atrocity that had been perpetrated by Simeon and Levi. But as Jacob obediently responds to the divine summons, he finds himself under divine protection.

After telling us that Jacob built the altar and worshipped the Lord at Bethel, Moses then tells us that Deborah, Rebekah’s nurse, was with Jacob and his family at Bethel and that she died there. This is something that comes out of the blue. We did not even know that Deborah was with Jacob at this point, or how it came about that she was traveling

with them. It may be that Rebekah sent her to Jacob so that she could help train and manage the many servants in that household. In addition, we would not even know Deborah's name were it not for this passage. She is a minor character. It is odd to have her mentioned all of a sudden when we do not know anything more about Rebekah. And that seems to be the point. This mention of Rebekah's nurse reminds us of the fact that Rebekah herself seems to have fallen out of the story. There is never any mention of her after Jacob's departure from his father's house. There is no report about her death or burial. And this stands out, because we are given reports about the deaths and burials of all of the other main characters in Genesis, including Sarah, Abraham, Rachel, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. This leaves us to wonder why we are told nothing more about Rebekah. And the only conclusion that we can come to is that this seems to be part of the price she paid for her role in Jacob's deception of Isaac.

While Jacob was at Bethel, the Lord appeared to him again and renewed his covenant with him. There is a great deal of repetition in the promises that God makes here, but there are also some new things. God had not told Jacob before that kings would come from his own body. This is an example of the progressive nature of divine revelation in the Bible. God reveals more and more about his plan of redemption as it unfolds within history.

We also see God repeating the words that he first spoke to Adam and Eve: "Be fruitful and multiply." This reminds us that God's purpose in raising up his covenant people is ultimately to bring about the completion of what he intended when he first

created mankind. He made man in his image, and he intended for man to fill the entire earth and rule over it as divine image-bearers. And this is exactly what is taking place through Jesus Christ in the covenant of grace: he has been given all authority in heaven and on earth, and through his church he is making disciples of all nations.

This brings us to the second section in our passage: Jacob's journey from Bethel to his father's house. After this high point in Jacob's life, this time of covenant renewal with the Lord, it is disappointing to see what takes place in the rest of this chapter. First, as Jacob and his entourage made their way towards Isaac's home in Hebron, we have this account of the death of Rachel. Though death in childbirth was much more common in the ancient world than it is today, this still would have been a heartbreaking loss for Jacob. Rachel was the wife that he truly loved, and it was a sad irony that this woman who so desperately wanted to children lost her life in childbirth. It brings to mind the words that she had once said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I shall die!" But even sadder still is the way in which Rachel dies. There is such a thing as dying a good death, dying a death of faith, and there is not much evidence that Rachel died such a death. This does not mean that she did not have faith, but her response as she was confronted with death was not a response of faith. Though God was giving her the second son that she had asked for, she could only think of herself as he was being born. She named him Ben-Oni, which means "son of my trouble," a name that Jacob refused to accept. He changed the boy's name to Benjamin, which means "son of my right hand," son of my favor.

As Jacob moves on from the place where Rachel died, we come to another disturbing part of this story. Moses tells us that Reuben, Jacob's oldest son, slept with his father's concubine Bilhah. This sordid episode is not glossed over, but it is only given the very briefest mention. Unlike so many of today's movies and television shows, the details are all left out, preventing the report itself from having a corrupting influence upon those who read it.

We do not know exactly what motivated Reuben to do such a disgraceful thing, but we can make a pretty good guess. The odds are that this was not simply a matter of lust, but was an attempt by Reuben to take over as the head of the family. In the ancient Near East, one of the ways that a son would sometimes make this move was by sleeping with his father's concubines. We see Absalom doing this later on in the Old Testament when he tries to take the throne from his father David. And we know that there was tension between Jacob and the sons of Leah. We saw that tension in the previous chapter. It could also be that Reuben was trying to make sure that Jacob did not make Bilhah, who was Rachel's maid, his favorite wife now that Rachel was dead.

As I said, we are not given very much information about this matter, but there is one more thing that is said in verse 22 that stands out. It says that Jacob heard about what Reuben had done. He heard about it, but he did not do anything about it. Here again, as in the previous chapter when he learned about what happened to Dinah, Jacob is strangely silent. He does not deal with the matter as he should, at least not at first. Later on, when he pronounces his blessings upon his twelve sons, Reuben's actions are

mentioned as the reason why he lost his standing as the firstborn son. And something similar is said about Jacob's next two sons, Simeon and Levi, because of their slaughter of the Shechemites. This was how the birthright passed on to Jacob's fourth oldest son, Judah.

Reuben's actions were disgraceful, but they also reflected very poorly on Jacob. Just take a look at what we have read about Jacob's children so far in our study of Genesis. One of his daughters is disgraced because of her unwise associations with unbelievers. Two of his sons enact an unjust vengeance upon an entire town for one man's sin. One of his sons sleeps with one of his father's wives. And that is not all. In the coming chapters, one of them will sleep with his own daughter-in-law, thinking that she is a prostitute. And then, to top it all off, most of the brothers will band together and sell Joseph into slavery in Egypt. It goes without saying that Jacob failed to manage his household well. Yes, his sons were responsible for their actions, but it was Jacob's failure as a father that created such a dysfunctional household in the first place. Here, at this point of transition, as the focus shifts from Jacob to his twelve sons, it is entirely clear that these men were in no condition to succeed their father as leaders of the covenant people.

In our study of this book, we have now seen two instances in which the Lord tells Jacob that he will no longer be called Jacob but Israel. And we have said that this was the Lord's way of telling Jacob that he had given him a new nature, a new heart. He was no longer Jacob the deceiver; he was now Israel, the one who strives with God and overcomes through faith. But the interesting thing is that in the remainder of Genesis the

old name Jacob is still used more frequently than the new name Israel. Have you ever wondered why this is the case? It is because of the fact that there was still an awful lot of Jacob in Jacob, and, by extension, in his family as well. Yet at those glorious moments when God appeared to Jacob to confirm his promises, God looked upon Jacob and the only thing that he saw was Israel. He only saw the new man, the forgiven man, the regenerated man. And why? Only because of Jacob's faith. As the Genesis narrative emphasizes time and time again, God did not save these people because of anything that he saw in them. And the same is true of all who call upon the Lord Jesus Christ in faith. "Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness!" [Ps. 115:1]