

“Life is a Series of Hellos and Goodbyes”

Genesis 35:1-29

March 19th, 2017

Since my high school days, I’ve enjoyed the music of Billy Joel. He’s no theologian, and I don’t know that he’s a Christian. But he does have keen insights into life and people.

In 1976, his album “Turnstiles” was released. Among the songs that album contains is, “Say Goodbye to Hollywood.” Some of its lyrics are especially applicable to the text before us today:

“So many faces in and out of my life
Some will last,
Some will just be now and then.

Life is a series of hellos and goodbyes
I’m afraid it’s time for goodbye again.
Say goodbye to Hollywood.”

For quite some time now, we’ve been working our way through the Bible’s first book, Genesis. Over the last couple of months, we’ve seen that God has a plan for a remnant of the people He created; beginning with Abram back in Genesis Chapter 12, God promised to show His favor to Abram and his descendants. God called Abram to leave his pagan life and go to a land God would show him. Despite sinful choices and major challenges from all directions, we’ve seen God has been faithful to His promises to Abraham and his wife Sarah, their son Isaac and his wife Rebekah, and their son Jacob.

And, that’s really important to us, because if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, this is your spiritual heritage we’re studying! Our family tree, as believers in Jesus Christ goes back to Abraham, and the promises given to him impact our lives (baptism, for instance). The Apostle Paul put it this way as we read in **Galatians 3:29** – “And if you *are* Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”

With **Genesis 35**, we come to the end of another section in Genesis. From this point forward, Jacob will no longer be the prominent patriarch as he has been since chapter 27. With chapter 37, and running to the end of Genesis (chapter 50), Joseph takes center stage. As you’ll see as we read through this chapter, there are lots of loose ends being tied up.

Genesis 35:1-29:

“Then God said to Jacob, “Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there; and make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from the face of Esau your brother.”

² And Jacob said to his household and to all who *were* with him, “Put away the foreign gods that *are* among you, purify yourselves, and change your garments. ³ Then let us arise and go up to Bethel; and I will make an altar there to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me in the way which I have gone.” ⁴ So they gave Jacob all the foreign gods which *were* in their hands, and the earrings which *were* in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the terebinth tree which *was* by Shechem. ⁵ And they journeyed, and the terror of God was upon the cities that *were* all around them, and they did not pursue the sons of Jacob. ⁶ So Jacob came to Luz (that *is*, Bethel), which *is* in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who *were* with him. ⁷ And he built an altar there and called the place El Bethel, because there God appeared to him when he fled from the face of his brother.

⁸ Now Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died, and she was buried below Bethel under the terebinth tree. So the name of it was called Allon Bachuth.

⁹ Then God appeared to Jacob again, when he came from Padan Aram, and blessed him. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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. ¹² The land which I gave Abraham and Isaac I give to you; and to your descendants after you I give this land." ¹³ Then God went up from him in the place where He talked with him. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ And Jacob called the name of the place where God spoke with him, Bethel.

¹⁶ Then they journeyed from Bethel. And when there was but a little distance to go to Ephrath, Rachel labored *in childbirth*, and she had hard labor. ¹⁷ Now it came to pass, when she was in hard labor, that the midwife said to her, "Do not fear; you will have this son also." ¹⁸ And so it was, as her soul was departing (for she died), that she called his name Ben-Oni; but his father called him Benjamin. ¹⁹ So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that *is*, Bethlehem). ²⁰ And Jacob set a pillar on her grave, which *is* the pillar of Rachel's grave to this day.

²¹ Then Israel journeyed and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder. ²² And it happened, when Israel dwelt in that land, that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine; and Israel heard *about it*. Now the sons of Jacob were twelve: ²³ the sons of Leah *were* Reuben, Jacob's firstborn, and Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun; ²⁴ the sons of Rachel *were* Joseph and Benjamin; ²⁵ the sons of Bilhah, Rachel's maidservant, *were* Dan and Naphtali; ²⁶ and the sons of Zilpah, Leah's maidservant, *were* Gad and Asher. These *were* the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Padan Aram.

²⁷ Then Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre, or Kirjath Arba (that *is*, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had dwelt. ²⁸ Now the days of Isaac were one hundred and eighty years. ²⁹ So Isaac breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people, *being* old and full of days. And his sons Esau and Jacob buried him."

Where God wasn't mentioned even once in chapter 34, He is everywhere present in this chapter. The years **Genesis 34** covers were filled with lust, deceit, and murder among other things. In **Genesis 35**, the name "God" appears 11 times. And, it is used another 11 times in the names Israel, Bethel, and El Bethel; and another time in the name El Shaddai ("God Almighty"). So, that's 23 times in 29 verses!

MP 1 – The Need for Keeping Spiritual Commitments;
MP 2 – The Manner of Fulfilling Spiritual Commitments;
MP 3 – The Results of Keeping Spiritual Commitments.

Before Jacob returned to Bethel, various acts of purification were necessary. And, the need for those is because of the pervasiveness of death and sin that threatens faith.

God addresses Jacob right as the chapter begins, calling Him to return to Bethel and remember his vow. Back in **Genesis 28**, as he was moving away from his family in Beersheba, Jacob came to rest in a place he would call "Bethel", meaning "House of God." One night on his travels, God came to Jacob in a dream – that dream revealed a ladder between heaven and earth on which angels were ascending and descending. Awaking the next morning, Jacob vows to God (**Genesis 28:20-22**):

"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, ²¹ so that I come back to my father's house in peace, then

the LORD shall be my God. ²² 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."

God expects His people to keep their word. **Ecclesiastes 5:4** teaches, "When you make a vow to God, do not delay to fulfill it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow." (NIV) So, when we make oaths and take vows, we must do so with an aim for keeping them, not trying to wriggle out of them. This applies to the vows we take in marriage, joining a church, and in helping other parents raise their children to know Jesus at baptism, as we've done so today. (That would include ministering in the nursery, helping with Sunday School, teaching or serving at Vacation Bible School, "Bible Bunch", and Wonderful Wednesday. So please don't be so quick to decline when asked to serve!)

We've all attended or participated in weddings. And, they are special occasions for sure. *But, have you considered your role in helping a couple keep their wedding vows when you attended their wedding?* You were a witness to their vows, and if you care about the couple, you will step in and offer your help when the situation dictates. As he did with Jacob, God will call us to give account of our vows.

Did you notice the numerous deaths mentioned in this chapter? Deborah (v. 8), Rachel (v. 19), and Isaac (v. 29). Death surely threatens our spiritual commitments. It is never easy, convenient, or joyous! Yet, the message of the Bible is clear – unless Jesus comes back to earth first, each of us will come to the end of life in death. **Psalm 89:48** advises, "What man can live and not see death?" **Romans 3:23** teaches, "...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." **Psalm 90:10** even tells us the life span we should expect – "The days of our lives *are* seventy years; and if by reason of strength *they are* eighty years,"

As if death weren't enough, we all struggle mightily with sin. In today's passage, Reuben, Jacob's first born, is singled out for his sin (v. 22). After Rachel dies, Reuben has relations with Bilhah, Rachel's handmaiden, thus preventing her from becoming family matriarch. Reuben challenged his father's authority, essentially saying that he was now head of the family.

You know why that developed, don't you? As we've seen since the twins – Esau and Jacob – were born, Isaac favored Esau, and Rebekah favored Jacob. Double the trouble when parents pit themselves against each other because they each favored a different child. Then, pitting the children against themselves, as well. Favoritism breeds great sin!

Yet, there is no one among us who is without sin. We sin because we are sinners – and we're pretty good at it! Christians aren't exempt from sin's stranglehold– the Apostle Paul was even well-acquainted with the pervasiveness and irrationality of sin. Read **Romans 7:18-24** this afternoon. Paul knew what he should do, but at times, he did what he shouldn't do. He couldn't understand the madness of his sin! And, neither do we, at times, have a grip on our sin!

So, we've covered **the need for keeping spiritual commitments**; let's now discuss **the manner of fulfilling our spiritual commitments**. The text teaches we do this by purification and worship. To be purified spiritually, we need to be rid of the pollution of our sin. The first thing Jacob did was to instruct his family to remove the idols from their possessions. They did that, and they were buried.

Idolatry was not only something Old Testament personalities struggled with. It was also a New Testament problem for the Church. At the first General Assembly of the Church – the Jerusalem Council (**Acts 15**), church leaders came up with a list of abstentions for the church to consider. The first one listed in their decree to the church was to “abstain from things offered to idols.” (**Acts 15:20**)

So many think idolatry isn't practiced today – don't fall into that trap! When we understand what idolatry is – substituting what is created for the Creator – we can more easily identify it in our own lives. If we're not careful, we can worship things that are good in themselves - nature, money, mankind, power, social and political systems - instead of the God who created them all.

Purification also consisted of changing one's garments. Soiled garments reflected a soiled sinner wearing them. White garments signified purity and cleansing. In a similar way, we have the teaching of **Ephesians 4:20-24**, where God's people are instructed to take off the sinful garments (the sins of the old man), and replace them with new ones (the righteousness of Christ).

A second way of fulfilling our spiritual commitments is to worship God. **Psalm 45:11** tells us, “Because He *is* your Lord, worship Him...” **Psalm 95:6** reads. “Come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD our Maker. For He *is* our God, and we *are* the people of His pasture...” Jacob worshipped God in erecting altars for sacrifices, pillars for memorials, and offering drink and oil offerings. We no longer worship God in these ways, with the earthly arrival of His long promised Deliverer, Jesus Christ.

The responsible worship of God in Christ in our day takes place in three distinct spheres – on an individual basis, in the family home, and among the church gathered on Sunday. All three of them are important for your spiritual nourishment, and that of your family. If you do not have a personal devotional time each day, you must get started – ask one of the elders or a Christian friend to find out how to go about doing that. A time of regular family devotion is also necessary – this doesn't take much time or effort – reading a Scripture, commenting on it, and offering prayer, and or singing a hymn, psalm or Christian tune!

Most important is a consistent attendance at the church's largest weekly gathering, the Sunday service. To routinely miss this gathering does nothing to strengthen your faith, and your absence weakens the effectiveness of the church. God has gifted each of us to serve others in the larger body. Let us seek – or continue to seek - to make Sunday morning a weekly priority!

The third and final point is **the Results of Keeping Spiritual Commitments.** Put simply, that is to continue to receive God's blessing and the confirmation of His promises to us that are yet to be fulfilled. God wasn't done with Jacob; we've seen Jacob bob back and forth between his two natures and names – his old one (Jacob, sinful) and his new one (Israel, righteous).

With verses 17 and 18 in today's text, God blessed Jacob with a 12th son, Benjamin (Rachel's name was Ben Oni, which means “son of my suffering.” But in the delivery of her child, Rachel died. The arrival of a blessed child meant the loss of Jacob's beloved Rachel. Oh, how like life in a fallen world!

God blesses His people today. **Psalm 115:3** - “He will bless those who fear the LORD, *both small and great.*”

And, God is faithful to His promises to you, Christian. **I Thessalonians 5:24**, “He who calls you *is faithful*, who also will do *it.*”

So, dear ones, in a spirit of **Hebrews 10:23**, “Let us hold fast the confession of *our* hope without wavering, for He who promised *is faithful.*”

- MP 1 – The Need for Keeping Spiritual Commitments;**
- MP 2 – The Manner of Fulfilling Spiritual Commitments;**
- MP 3 – The Results of Keeping Spiritual Commitments.**

St. Patrick’s *Lorica* (prayer)

“Christ with me,
Christ before me,
Christ behind me,
Christ in me,
Christ beneath me,
Christ above me,
Christ on my right,
Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down,
Christ when I sit down,
Christ when I arise,
Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me.”