

# LIFE BIBLE STUDY

## SESSION OBJECTIVE: GENESIS 35:1-36:43

To learn how Jacob continued to change after his name change, and how Esau's descendants became the nation of Edom.

## Progressive Transformation

The New Testament teaches that faith in Jesus Christ entails both an *event* and a *process*. Faith in Christ begins with *the event of salvation*. It happens and it is finished. We are immediately declared righteous (Rom. 5:1), forgiven (Eph. 1:7), cleansed (1 Jn. 1:7), given citizenship in God's eternal Kingdom (Col. 1:13), and made



into a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). This is something that is being worked out, but it is an instantaneous and complete work of God in our lives. After that event of salvation, however, we enter into *the process of sanctification*. Sanctification is the slow process of God shaping us into the image of His Son Jesus (Rom. 8:29; 12:2). In other words, God does all of the work up front to declare us righteous and able to have fellowship with Him, and then *through our fellowship with Him we become like Him*. It's a process that happens over time.

This same kind of process can be seen in the life of Jacob. Jacob is changed by God and then given a new name (Gen. 32:28). It's an event that takes place that marks a significant shift in the character of Jacob. Afterwards, however, we can still see him being changed. Genesis chapter 35 shows God still working on Jacob's heart. In Genesis 32 Jacob is named Israel; now we see him becoming Israel.

## Buried

Chapter 35 begins with God calling Jacob back to the Bethel to, “make an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau” (Gen. 35:1). God’s appeal to Jacob leads Jacob to appeal to his people. He gives them two specific commands before they embark on their journey. Below is a breakdown of each of the commands.

### ***DITCH THE FOREIGN GODS***

The first thing he says to them is, “Put away the foreign gods that are among you.” The Hebrew verb here means something like, “to remove, to turn away from, or separate.” In other words, Jacob isn’t merely asking them to part ways with the physical objects, but with the practice of idolatry at large. He isn’t just asking them to throw the idols away, but to turn away from the practice of idolatry altogether.

Where did these foreign gods come from? We aren’t told. It’s tempting to apply Rachel’s idol that she stole from her father Laban. While she is no doubt included in the audience he is speaking to (“his household and all who were with him”), recall that Jacob was unaware of her theft. This is likely indicative of two things. For one, idolatry was a common practice in these regions. Abraham himself came from a foreign land, and that foreign land (including his own father) honored and venerated foreign gods (Jo. 24:2). While they had many experiences through the generations with Yahweh, they were not bound by a religious law or code yet as Israel eventually is through the Mosaic covenant. The Abrahamic covenant is prominent throughout Genesis, but it is a promise and covenant ratified by circumcision, but passed down verbally. In other words, there is no written law yet. So the order of worship and religious practice is not as clear at this time. Secondly, and perhaps more prominently, Jacob’s sons had just looted Shechem and taken the women and children captive. They had likely looted many of the false gods while they were there, and the captives likely had taken some of their own false gods as well. Jacob’s call is the first definitive call to his people to remove the idols from their lives. Following Yahweh is not something one can do half-heartedly; He shares His glory with no one (Is. 42:8).

One last detail should be mentioned regarding the idols. There is a bit of stabbing humor here. Once the foreign gods have been surrendered, Jacob takes them and buries them under a tree. It seems like a minor detail but there is a very clear message being sent here. When you consider what happened to the foreign god that Rachel stole, and now this episode of Jacob burying them, it becomes very clear that these idols are no match for Yahweh. Yahweh gives Divine counsel and commandments. He provides supernaturally and protects supernaturally. He appears to Jacob vividly with angels in His midst. What have the idols accomplished? They have been stolen (Gen. 31:19), sat on (Gen. 31:34), stained with menstrual blood (Gen. 31:35), and now buried.

### ***PURIFY YOURSELVES***

Putting away the idols was just the start. The second thing Jacob asks them to do is, “purify yourselves and change your garments” (Gen. 35:2). Purification becomes significantly more important in the Mosaic era. It was required to enter the presence of the Lord (Ex. 19:10; 30:19–21), and to enter the camp of Israel (Lev. 16:26, 28; Num. 5:3). It often included washing one’s garments as well (Lev. 13:34; 14:8; Num. 8:21). Changing garments is also common anytime someone approaches the Lord (Lev. 6:10–11; 2 Sam. 12:20). Why Jacob asks them to do this is not spelled out. The use of the word, “defilement” to describe what happened to Dinah, as well as the retribution for such crimes would have rendered the camp unclean (Num 31:19–20). The point is that Yahweh is holy and people are not. To appeal to Yahweh or even come into His presence required purification. However, for believers in Christ, the blood of Jesus purifies us once and for all,

rendering the need for such practices void (Heb. 9:14). Now, we purify ourselves for the sake of reverence (2 Cor. 7:1).

With the purification complete and the idols buried, Jacob and his people depart and head towards Bethel. Part of God's promise to Jacob through the Abrahamic blessing is that God will protect Jacob (Gen. 12:3; 28:15), and He maintains this promise once again (Gen. 35:5). The enemies that would have likely come after Jacob for any number of reasons (his wealth or perhaps his actions in Shechem) did not pursue him because a, "terror" fell upon them. The word in Hebrew means literally, "terror." They were beyond scared, but terrorized to their core. Their fear paralyzed them from moving against him, and Jacob made it to Bethel unharmed (Gen. 35:6). While there, the nurse of Rebekah (Deborah) died, and was buried. The significance of Deborah is demonstrated in her death being recorded. Women are typically not mentioned when they die in Genesis unless they serve an important role.

## Benjamin

As you already likely know, Jacob has a twelfth son to round out what will eventually become the Twelve Tribes of Israel. In our previous studies, we looked at the births of eleven of the twelve, and in that study (Week 24) we also covered briefly the birth of Benjamin. Here we will take a closer look, as Benjamin does stand apart from the rest of his brothers for at least two reasons.

### ***BIRTHPLACE***

One of the separating factors between Benjamin and his brothers is where he was born. All eleven brothers were born in Mesopotamia, but Benjamin is born in Canaan. After leaving Bethel but prior to arrive in Ephrath, Rachel goes into labor (Gen. 35:16). Thus, Benjamin is the only son actually born in the promised land. Where exactly was this birthplace though?

Benjamin's birthplace would then be south of Jerusalem and north of Bethlehem, assuming that Ephrath is the same place as Ephrathah (Ruth 4:11; 1 Chr. 4:4; Mic. 5:2). Beyond the details of Benjamin's birth, we can also put some pieces together regarding Rachel's death, since the locations are one and the same. We know that Rachel's burial site was in what eventually (and reasonably) become the land occupied by the tribe of Benjamin (1 Sam. 10:2). Jeremiah connects her burial place with Ramah, however, which is north of Jerusalem (Jer. 31:5). How do we reconcile this? Because of the lack of specificity in all of these passages, it is reasonable to assume they were reference general places, not specific locations. If you put all of these locations together, you can see one common area where portions of all three coalesce (think of a Venn Diagram). That would make her burial site connected to Ramah, on the border of Benjamin's and Judah's territories, and still one mile south of Jerusalem.

### ***HIS NAME***

There is also some uniqueness to Benjamin's name in that Benjamin is the only son of the twelve that is named by his father, not by his mother (Gen. 35:18). Rachel does intend to name him, and she chooses the name, "Ben-oni." There is great debate over what this name really means. It could mean, "Son of my misfortune." If translated this way, it might be a reflection of the reality that death was upon Rachel and she knew it. Death during child labor was especially common in the ancient world, and it is possible that her name reflected her certain demise. It can also be translated, "Son of my wickedness." If this is the case, perhaps she views her impending death as judgment for stealing her father's idol and then lying about it? There are several other suggestions that are less convincing and perhaps the ambiguity of the name was not lost on Jacob and was the ultimate reason he chose to rename him, "Benjamin." Benjamin means simply, "Son of

good fortune.” Male babies were valued more than female babies because male babies could continue the family line. This is reflected in the words of Rachel’s midwife as she is dying: “Do not fear, for you have another son” (Gen. 35:17). These same words are spoken to Phinehas’s dying wife in labor as well (1 Sam. 4:20).

#### **RACHEL**

As noted, Rachel dies during childbirth. There is some resolution to her story in these details. Prior to the birth of Benjamin, she conceived one other time and gave birth to Joseph. She believed that, in Joseph’s birth, God’s reproach on her life had been lifted (Gen. 30:23). In naming him Joseph, she said, “May the LORD add to me another son” (Gen. 35:24). Benjamin’s birth was in some way God’s faithfulness to her desire to have another son. Beyond that, Rachel’s record of death is significant for two reasons. For one, as mentioned several times now, the death of a woman is rarely recorded. Rachel’s life was significant as the mother of both Joseph and Benjamin, and so her record of death makes sense. However, additionally, she is also buried in Canaan. As Benjamin is the first of Jacob’s family to be born in the promised land, Rachel will rest there in death.

## Reuben

One final detail in chapter 35 happens so quick that it’s easy to skip over it. Reuben, the son of Jacob and Leah, has sexual intercourse with Bilhah, Rachel’s handmaiden (and mother to his half-brothers Dan and Naphtali). This event is important because of what it will mean for Reuben’s descendants and his lack of blessing and prominence as Jacob’s firstborn. Typically, the firstborn is to receive the double-portion of blessing, even if his mother is the lesser favored one of many to the husband (Deut. 21:15-17). However, because of his actions, he loses the favor of his father (Gen. 49:4). The Chronicler provides even further clarity, noting that Jacob gave Reuben’s blessing to Joseph’s sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. We will cover these blessings and curses in a later session.

## Isaac

The last detail given in chapter 35 is a big one. Isaac, the son of Abraham and the father of Jacob, dies. He lives 180 years (Gen. 35:28). The description of being, “old and full of days” (Gen. 35:29) indicates that Isaac lived a long, prosperous, blessed, and fruitful life. He was surrounded by those he loved, a remind of God’s faithfulness to him. Isaac’s story came to a positive end.

One interesting detail is the presence of both Jacob and Esau. Typically, their encounter after Jacob’s name is changed is seen as their last. If that is the case, Jacob blows off Esau and never talks to him again, which paints a pretty negative picture of Jacob. It isn’t totally out of character for Jacob to do something like that, but bear in mind, Jacob had just been renamed to Israel, and it is out of character for Israel. However, the death of Isaac indicates that they did have contact at least once after that, and there is nothing negatively recorded about it. If this is the case, perhaps Jacob and Esau did continue to have peaceful contact with one another afterwards? It isn’t clear, but certainly possible.

## Edom

Chapter 36 does not present any major developments to Jacob’s narrative, but serves as a bridge to Joseph’s narrative. However, chapter 36 is important for other reasons. It unfolds the lineage of Esau and shows how his people became the nation of Edom, and developed quite prosperously. Edom had kings and chiefs, and

Esau's descendants were highly numbered. Chapter 36 serves to show that Yahweh was faithful to Esau still. Being the son of Isaac and the grandson of Abraham, he was still blessed by God and made fruitful. He ended up dwelling in Seir, but not because of a bitter departure from Jacob, but for the same reason that Lot and Abraham separated in Genesis 13; they simply had too much livestock between the two of them for the land to support them both (Gen. 36:6-8). In spite of losing the birthright and the blessing, Esau still lived a prosperous life as well.

## Study Questions

### Day One

1. Read Genesis 35:1-4. Where did God tell Jacob to go? What did Jacob command of his people prior to leaving for Bethel? What did he do with the foreign gods?

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2. Read Genesis 35:5-8. Why did no one attack them while they journeyed? What new name did Jacob give to Bethel? What did Jacob do once he arrived? Who died while they were there?

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### Day Two

1. Read Genesis 35:9-15. On a piece of paper, make two columns and put "Jacob" at the top of one and "God" at the top of the other. Write down what God says about Jacob in the first column, and what He says about Himself in the second column. Then, record the actions of both Jacob and God as well.

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2. Read Genesis 35:16-21. Where were they when Rachel went into labor? What did the midwife say to her while she labored? What did Rachel call her son? What did Jacob call his son? How was Rachel buried?

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### Day Three

1. Read Genesis 35:22. What sin did Reuben commit, and what was his punishment? (Hint: See notes above)

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2. Read Genesis 35:23-26. Write down the names of the twelve sons of Jacob and the mothers who bore them.

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### Day Four

1. Read Genesis 35:27-29. How old was Isaac when he died? Who was there to bury him?

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2. Read Genesis 36:1-43. What does this chapter reveal about how God cared for Esau?
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## Week 28 Discussion: Ch-ch-changes!

Genesis 35 shows Jacob grow into his new identity as Israel. After the wrestling match that left him limping (Gen. 32:31), his identity shifted, but it took time for him to begin acting that way. Chapter 35 shows Jacob committed to speaking out and acting against the practice of idolatry, and recognizing the need for purifying oneself before following Yahweh. A very similar process occurs today in Christians as well. We are made into new creations the moment we profess faith in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:17), yet we are in need of transformation in our minds which takes time (Rom. 12:2). Talk as a group about what this change has looked like throughout your new life in Christ, and the struggles you've faced along the way.

1. Icebreaker: What are some noticeable changes you've seen in yourself since you came to faith?
2. Were there any changes that happened in your life instantaneously (the moment you were saved)?
3. What sin patterns remained in your life after coming to faith that God is still working on? Is that frustrating?
4. If you've ever been in a Freedom Group, share your experience with the group and what sin behaviors you were able to address and work through during that time.
5. How important is it for the church to recognize that not all sinful behavior goes away immediately upon believing in Jesus? What can happen if the church does NOT recognize this?
6. If you could have God take away one sinful behavior in your life, what would it be? As a group, pray for one another that God would begin to work on those behaviors.

## Takeaways:

1. Jacob continues to be shaped into his new identity as Israel, and God continues to faithfully protect and provide for him and his people.
2. Deborah dies, Benjamin is born, Rachel dies, and Isaac dies.
3. God blessed Esau and made him into the nation of Edom despite him not being the "chosen" son of Isaac.

### **PRAYER REQUESTS:**