



Part 67 – Tenacious, Scandalous Grace

Genesis 35:1-15

Jacob's misguided decision to settle his family in Shechem within the precincts of a Canaanite town led to tragic consequences. By failing to lead his family to Bethel Jacob placed them instead in great peril as chapter 34 reveals. The violation of Dinah and her brothers' bloodthirsty vengeance left lasting consequences upon the covenant family. The weight of Jacob's compromises and indifference combined with his sons' vengeful actions make the turn of events in chapter 35 remarkable if not scandalous. Why? Because what is depicted is grace. God's treatment of Jacob and his family is a reminder of just how tenacious is His gracious hold upon his people.

God's Command (vs. 1)

- "God said" – The Lord takes the initiative in renewing the covenant with his flawed and sinful servant. This is sovereign grace. "Go up" is likely ritualistic language meant as a call to worship. Genuine repentance must have worship as its goal. "When you fled from your brother Esau," indicates that by returning to Bethel Jacob will have come full circle, returning to the place to which God had directed him.

Jacob's Obedience (vv. 2-8)

Vs. 2 – "All who were with him" would have included those women and children his sons had taken captive from Shechem. Jacob's already large household had grown larger.

Vs. 3 – Having come to his senses, Jacob realized there were things he must rid his household of. His journey to Bethel had to be marked by acts of repentance. He instructed his family concerning the importance of their worshipping God in Bethel.

Vs. 4 – The jewelry was to be gotten rid of because it bore pagan images. Archeological efforts have uncovered a wealth of such religious jewelry throughout the region. The tree under which those objects were buried was a place of pagan worship. Burying the pagan rings in a public and dramatic way would serve to repudiate both the place and the paganism practiced there.¹

Vs. 5 – Though this protection was ultimately given by God, it was almost certainly what Jacob's sons had done to the Shechemites which served as the immediate cause of the fear in the hearts of the surrounding peoples.

Vv. 6-7 – Once they arrived at Bethel Jacob built and consecrated an altar of worship to the LORD.

Vs. 8 – Allon-bacuth means "Oak of Weeping."

- Jacob serves as a kind of model for every believer in Jesus Christ. Jacob models the pattern of repentance leading to a renewal of devotion and worship. This is one of the principle motifs of the Bible's description of the Christian life.

God's Promise Renewed (vv 9-13)

Vs. 11 – These are the very promises God had first made to Abraham, repeated to Isaac, and of which Jacob was now the heir. God's promise that kings will "come from your own body" is significant. As Paul says in Romans 4:12, the patriarchs are the fathers of all those (Jew and Gentile) who have faith in Christ. Every Christian descends from Jacob who was also the ancestor of King David and Jesus.

Vs. 13 – What is described here is a theophany, an appearance of God to Jacob. It ended in the same way God's appearance to Abraham had ended (17:22).

- By its very definition, God's grace goes to the underserving. As soon as we begin to grumble about God's gracious salvation in the life of any sinner we prove that we have missed the point of grace entirely.

Jacob Dedicates Bethel (vv. 14-15)

- God protects Jacob and his household as they make their way through hostile land on their way to Bethel. Once there, Jacob builds and consecrates an altar to the worship of the Lord renewing the family's proper allegiance to God. And then, as if God had not already been far more gracious than he should, he restates his covenant promise in greater and more lavish language than he had previously stated earlier in Jacob's life.

¹ Bruce Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001) pp. 472-473

Vs. 14 – “A pillar of stone” – This was a rather common way to mark a place which held some sort of significance. Here, Jacob’s aim is probably to re-dedicate Bethel as a place for the Lord’s presence just as he had vowed to do once he returned to the Land. The formal religious significance of the moment is seen by Jacob pouring out “a drink offering” (probably wine) and oil upon the stone pillar (practices which will later be codified in Israel’s worship rituals).

Vs. 15 – As God had rededicated Jacob to himself by naming him Israel once again, so now Jacob rededicates the place as Bethel, “the house of God.”

- If we are honest, what we read in the first half of chapter 35 leaves us scandalized. How can God continue to watch over and keep such a mess of a people as Jacob and his family? How can God continue to keep his covenant promise after so many failures on Jacob’s part? After the idolatrous perversions of his family for nearly 10 years? To all of this the answer is grace; God’s tenacious, scandalous grace. Grace that will not let us go. Grace that saves sinners.

Theology Applied:

1. Conformity to the world is disobedience to God.

- Once Jacob hears the Lord’s call and determines finally to return to Bethel he calls the members of his household to put away their gods and the jewelry containing pagan imagery. This tells us that during their sojourn in Shechem the family had begun taking up the worship of the Canaanites. This should not be surprising. Friendship with the world will ultimately lead to conformity to the world. Envy of the culture will lead to conformity to the culture. This does not mean that Christians ought to shun unbelievers. As was pointed out in the previous message, the mission of the church requires that we have relationships with unbelievers. But we must always maintain a proper distance to the practices, loves, entertainments, and idolatries of the world. “You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4).

2. Repentance involves action.

- Jacob cannot repent and remain in Shechem. For repentance to be genuine and have its intended result, Jacob must not only regret and sorrow over his sin and years of compromise, he must take action and do the things God has commanded. This is what genuine repentance does. It begins with proper sorrow but continues with proper, restorative action.

3. Proper worship is offered God’s way, not ours.

- Though he set up a stone pillar there, Shechem was the wrong sanctuary. It was to Bethel that God had called Jacob. The terrible consequences of this compromise illustrates “the importance of worshipping God only according to his agenda. The church’s form of worship is ‘God’s face’ in the world. The church must not deviate from his prescribed form lest they change his face. God will judge, not bless a willful church.”²

4. God’s grace is entirely unmerited.

- Given the events described in chapter 34, God’s grace to Jacob appears all the more extraordinary and, yes, scandalous. How can God restore one who had failed so miserably and whose failures had such terrible consequences? How can God renew his covenant with a man who failed as Jacob failed?
- God’s tenacious, scandalous grace has always been a stumbling block. It requires that we take account of our own sin. It requires that we see ourselves for the rebels we are. God’s amazing grace requires our humility because grace highlights our utter helplessness to gain favor with God on our own terms. Grace reveals that our sin has left us bereft of any righteousness that we might plead on our own behalf.
- But for those who see their sin and the spiritual and moral bankruptcy of their condition, the scandal of God’s grace toward sinners becomes the bright light of hope and the ultimate occasion for their joy. Did Jacob deserve God’s favor? Did he deserve to be redeemed, restored, and forgiven? Absolutely not. But neither do we. But it has pleased God in the mystery of his good and perfect will to save and keep ones such as us. The only reason any of us are saved is because even “when we are faithless God remains faithful for he cannot deny himself” (2 Timothy 2:13).

² Waltke, 475