



Genesis 2011 - Lesson 35B

Chapter 35:16-29

P.O. Box 702107
San Antonio, Texas, 78270
210.319.5055

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- We are nearing the end of the *toledot*, or genealogy, of Isaac
 - We've been focused on Jacob for so long you may have lost track that we've been studying the *toledat* of Isaac
 - Each of the patriarch's families take a turn under the spotlight in Genesis
 - And that spotlight ends when the patriarch dies
 - Isaac's life is about to come to an end, and when it does, our story will shift to the family of Jacob, particularly Judah and Joseph
 - Before we reach the moment of Isaac's death, we have one more tragedy to study
 - Last week we heard of Deborah's death, Rebekah's nurse
 - It provided an opportunity for Jacob to mourn his mother's death by proxy
 - Now we learn of an even more traumatic death for Jacob

Gen. 35:16 Then they journeyed from Bethel; and when there was still some distance to go to Ephrath, Rachel began to give birth and she suffered severe labor.

Gen. 35:17 When she was in severe labor the midwife said to her, "Do not fear, for now you have another son."

Gen. 35:18 It came about as her soul was departing (for she died), that she named him Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin.

Gen. 35:19 So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem).

Gen. 35:20 Jacob set up a pillar over her grave; that is the pillar of Rachel's grave to this day.

- Last week Moses told us that Jacob finally received the blessing of the covenant
 - In the Lord's earlier appearance, Jacob had received the Lord's promise to bless him with the inheritance
 - But the Lord had yet to consummate that promise with the blessing itself
 - Now that Jacob has obeyed the Lord's instructions and kept his vow, he receives the blessing of the covenant
 - His obedience was made complete by Jacob's movement to Bethel as God commanded
 - God told Jacob to dwell there last week
 - But apparently the time has come to wander again, because Jacob has set out for Ephrath
- Ephrath is the former name of the town of Bethlehem
 - In v.16 we're told they are still some distance away from Ephrath, when Rachel goes into labor
 - Just the news that Rachel is pregnant is a surprise
 - Jacob is likely over 100 years old at this point
 - Rachel hasn't been pregnant for 15 years, and we remember that she was the

last one to give birth in Jacob's family

- So this pregnancy must have been a big surprise
 - But it was also dangerous for a woman of her age to carry a child
 - And since she was Jacob's favorite, he is no doubt concerned for her on this trip
- We remember that back when she was warring with Leah over the affections of her husband, Rachel declared that she would die if she didn't have a child
 - Those prophetic words are coming back to her now
 - Because as she goes into labor, things begin to go wrong
 - She suffers severe labor we're told
 - Likely the labor caused internal bleeding and she bled to death even shortly after the child was born
 - The text says Rachel could feel her soul departing her body
 - This is a sensation that those who have come close to bleeding to death have reported
- In Rachel's case, there would be no resuscitation
 - As she lays dying, she chooses a name for her son
 - This has been the pattern for all Jacob's sons
 - The women were naming the children and often using the names to make a jab at the other wife
 - We noted then that Jacob would normally name the sons
 - But he seemed disinterested and unable to lead within his family
 - Rachel names her son Ben-oni, which means son of sorrow
 - Rachel knows she is mortally injured
 - How painful it must be for a mother to experience the joy of bringing a son into the world only to know that she wouldn't be there to enjoy him
 - But how comforting for believers to know that such a separation is only temporary
- After Rachel dies, Jacob decides to rename the child
 - This is certainly his prerogative as patriarch
 - What's unusual is that Jacob has never before shown an interest in naming any son
 - But for obvious reasons, Jacob feels a greater attraction to this boy
 - He is the last son born to his favorite wife
 - And any time Jacob sees this son, he will remember the loss of Rachel
 - So Jacob names his son Benjamin, which means son of my right hand
 - The right hand position in the eastern culture was considered the highest place of honor
 - In fact, this is still a matter of protocol in the military

- When two soldiers walk side by side, the highest ranking individual always walks on the right side of any group or column
 - Jacob names Benjamin with a name that tells everyone in the family that he will be a special child in Jacob's heart
- Jacob mourns for Rachel and buries her at the place where she died
 - The text says Rachel was buried on the road to Bethlehem, while they were still a distance away from the town
 - In 1 Samuel 10:2 this location is in the area that later belonged to the tribe of Benjamin
 - This makes sense that the tribe would receive as its inheritance the land in which their father was born
 - In fact, Benjamin is the only son born in the land
 - Later in Jeremiah 31:15, we're told that Rachel was buried near Ramah, which is in Benjamin
 - This location has been lost to us today, though the gravestone was standing in Moses' day and lasted until at least Jeremiah's day
 - That means the stone stood for 1,300 years or more after Rachel died
 - This is a testimony to the kind of grave that Jacob built for his wife
 - Doubtless it was a large grave stone, something capable of standing and being preserved for so long
 - And ever since, men have recognized the importance of giving their wives a big rock, so to speak
 - Today there is a tourist location south of Bethlehem that claims to be the burial place of Rachel
 - This is nothing but folklore
 - Ramah is located north of Bethlehem
 - Another example of how tradition often replaces Biblical truth given enough time and enough Biblical illiteracy
- Now the twelve sons of Israel are alive and the family is complete
 - With the next generation in place, it's time for Moses to address the outstanding question of where the seed promise moves next
 - We know it's been promised to Jacob and the Lord has confirmed that Jacob was to carry the promise forward
 - But with Isaac still alive, that promise has yet to transfer, and that time is almost here
 - Once Isaac dies and the *toledat* of his life is complete, the same question will shift to Jacob
 - Who will inherit the seed promise in Jacob's family
 - This is a much more interesting and complicated question
 - In the case of Abraham and Isaac, the question was much simpler
 - There were only two sons, so one was in and one was out

- But with Jacob, we have twelve sons from two different mothers
 - Remember the children of the slave women were considered to have come from their master
- So how will God decide who receives the Lord's promise?
 - Remember the patriarch's estate included an inheritance of his property and the inheritance of the Lord's seed promise
 - The Lord decided where His promise would go in the family
 - And the son with the birthright also held the privilege of receiving a double portion of the estate and the right to be patriarch in the family
- To help answer that question, Moses records one more short story about the behavior of one of Jacob's sons, Reuben

Gen. 35:21 Then Israel journeyed on and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder.

Gen. 35:22 It came about while Israel was dwelling in that land, that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine, and Israel heard of it. Now there were twelve sons of Jacob —

Gen. 35:23 the sons of Leah: Reuben, Jacob's firstborn, then Simeon and Levi and Judah and Issachar and Zebulun;

Gen. 35:24 the sons of Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin;

Gen. 35:25 and the sons of Bilhah, Rachel's maid: Dan and Naphtali;

Gen. 35:26 and the sons of Zilpah, Leah's maid: Gad and Asher. These are the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Paddan-aram.

Gen. 35:27 Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre of Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had sojourned.

Gen. 35:28 Now the days of Isaac were one hundred and eighty years.

Gen. 35:29 Isaac breathed his last and died and was gathered to his people, an old man of ripe age; and his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.

- Jacob and his family eventually end up moving to a region just outside the town of Bethlehem
 - Once again, Jacob remains a wanderer in the land, rather than set up a home in the town of Bethlehem
 - The tower of Eder refers to a watchtower set up in the wilderness just east of Bethlehem
 - These towers were erected to help shepherds watch for thieves moving among their flocks
 - The fact that Jacob's location is identified with a tower is evidence that he has remained outside the city of Bethlehem
 - While in this place, Reuben, Jacob's first born son, decides to lay with Rachel's maid, Bilhah
 - This is a disturbing comment seemingly inserted without connection to the rest of the story

- But it has tremendous meaning
- A man's concubine was neither a wife nor a slave, but somewhere in between
- While Rachel lived, she was a surrogate mother for a barren wife
- Now that Rachel was gone, she continued to be considered Jacob's property and had a status of wife, although with diminished importance
- Bilhah was mother to two of Reuben's younger brothers, Dan and Naphtali
- It seems unlikely that this was a case of rape or mere lust
 - Bilhah was at least 30 years his senior
 - And the timing of the event, following Rachel's death, suggests he waited until after his mother died to make this move against his father
- In that culture, to take another man's wife was a way of challenging his authority and power
 - It was a form a conquest over him
 - Reuben seems to be contesting his father's control of the family
 - Reuben was over 30 by now and perhaps he was impatient in waiting for the inheritance
 - Perhaps he simply assumed he could do what he pleased since the maid would one day be his
 - Being the first born, Reuben held the birthright, or so he expected
- This relationship constitutes a terrible injustice against Jacob
 - Reuben's action was similar to the prodigal son, taking his inheritance before his father was dead
 - It reminds us of a young Jacob, dishonoring his father in order to obtain a birthright he expected would be his
- The most important part of the entire verse are the words "Israel heard of it."
 - Moses' focus in Genesis is always birthright and the seed promise, and where this promise goes in each generation
 - Notice Moses uses the name "Israel" and not Jacob
 - That change in name is always a reference to the godly man, being led by the Spirit
 - Here we see the Lord influencing Israel to know of Reuben's actions
 - In the last verses of this chapter, we will reach the point of Isaac's death and we face the question of where the birthright goes next
 - We eventually get that answer when Jacob hands out his blessings on his children from his deathbed
 - Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, Israel will skip over Reuben for the birthright and the seed promise
 - And we now have the crucial piece of information explaining why Reuben does not receive the birthright
 - Because Reuben dishonors his father

- Finally, as we end Chapter 35, Moses gives us a moment to reflect on the relationship between Isaac and his son Jacob
 - When the two last saw one another, Jacob was deceiving his father in an attempt to gain the blessing God had promised to him
 - While Isaac was choosing to ignore the Lord in trying to place the blessing (and with it the seed promise) on the wrong son
 - Nearly 40 years has passed, and from scripture it seems clear that Jacob has never returned home nor seen his father since that time
 - Now begins to close the chapter of Isaac's life, first by showing the faithfulness of God
 - Moses lists Jacob's family of sons, the nation of Israel, the nation of future kings and nations
 - The nation through which the world would be blessed
 - The fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham, Isaac and now Jacob
 - Secondly, God shows us a reunion of sorts between father and son
 - Jacob arrives in Mamre 12 years before his father dies
 - Mamre is the place that Abraham and Isaac have sojourned or wandered
 - The reason for Jacob's return was in preparation to receive his father's estate upon his father's death
 - This is the fulfillment of the seed promise as given to Jacob and of God's faithfulness to Jacob's vow
 - Jacob left 30 years earlier with only a staff and he returns with a large family, with wealth, and now the promise of God is his
 - And when he left, he made a vow to the Lord asking to be returned safely to his father's house
 - God has now seen this promise to conclusion
- With this final step, Isaac's life story comes to an end
 - In a sense, each patriarch exists in the story to connect the dots between the prior patriarch and the next patriarch
 - Once that connection has been made, the story comes to its natural conclusion
 - Isaac's story was relatively simple
 - In fact, you can remember Isaac more for how he is connected to his father and son than for anything he did himself
 - Isaac was the son nearly sacrificed by his father, and Isaac was the father deceived by his son
 - Jacob's story won't end until his death in Chapter 49, but after his father dies, our attention will shift to his sons – and one son in particular; Joseph
 - The first born of each of Jacob's wives may contend for the birthright and the seed promise
 - The first born of Leah is now Judah, since Reuben, Simeon and Levi have

been disqualified

- The first born of Rachel is Joseph
- Both play instrumental roles in fulfilling God's promises to Abraham in Genesis 15