

# JACOB RETURNED TO HIS FATHER, ISAAC: CONFRONTING AND OVERCOMING TRIAL AFTER TRIAL GENESIS 35:16–29

## *Introduction*

Have you ever felt like the world was caving in on you? Felt like the pressure and strain was almost unbearable? As though you just could not bear much more?

- => Have you ever lost a dear wife or husband? Had to suffer the awful pain, sorrow, grief and loneliness that follow such a loss?
- => Have you ever had a son or daughter go astray and commit a horrible sin? Have you ever borne the pain, sorrow, grief, shame and embarrassment of a child who had committed a terrible sin that became public knowledge?
- => Have you ever sensed the heavy responsibility for your family? Sensed the pressure, tension and duty of having to take care of their need for food, clothing, housing, education and spiritual growth?
- => Have you ever lost a father or mother? Suffered the pain, sorrow, grief and sense of responsibility to carry on the family heritage of a godly name?

Jacob did. Jacob suffered every one of these heavy trials and responsibilities, one right after the other. This is what this passage is all about: teaching us how we can overcome the trials of life. No matter how many trials confront us at one time and no matter how terrifying they may be, there is a way to overcome and conquer all the trials of life.

The subject of this passage is: *Jacob Returned to His Father, Isaac: Confronting and Overcoming Trial After Trial*, Genesis 35:16-29.

- I. The death of Jacob's wife (vv. 16-21).
- II. The sin of Jacob's son (v. 22a).
- III. The responsibility for Jacob's sons (vv. 22b-27).
- IV. The death of Jacob's father (vv. 28-29).

## **I. *Genesis 35:16–21 The Death of Jacob's Wife, Rachel***

There was the death of Jacob's dear wife. God had just given Jacob and his people a true revival, leading them to genuine repentance. They had turned away from the sins of this world and turned completely to God. All this had taken place at Bethel, the house of God. Now Jacob was spiritually strengthened as never before, far more prepared to return to his father, Isaac, and to take over the responsibilities of the promised family. Thus Jacob and his people packed all their possessions, gathered all the herds together, and left Bethel. And they began the exhausting journey to Hebron, where Isaac lived. But before they had travelled far, a crisis arose that stopped them dead in their tracks.

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1. Rachel died. Jacob's beloved wife, the wife he had loved much, passed away (vv. 16-21).
  - a. Rachel had been pregnant with their second child, and the traveling was obviously too much for her. The excessive movement most likely started the birth pangs early, and the child was being born prematurely. Scripture says that she was in hard labour, having a very difficult time bearing the child (vv. 16-17).
  - b. But the child was fine, and Rachel named him right before she died (v. 18). She gave him the name *Benoni*, which means "son of my sorrow." However, Jacob did not want the child to bear a name that signified such sadness, so he changed the name to *Benjamin*, which means "the son of my right hand." In faith, Jacob was declaring that the son was to sit in an honoured position, at his right hand (v. 18).
  - c. Rachel died close to Bethlehem and was buried there (v. 19).
  - d. Jacob honoured his beloved wife by setting a pillar on top of the grave (v. 20). Note that the pillar was still existing some four to five hundred years later when Moses was writing this account. Remember, Rachel was the love of Jacob's heart. He had loved her from the first day he had seen her. He had worked seven long, laborious years for her, and then seven more years after he had been tricked into marrying Leah before Rachel. This dear couple had walked together through thick and thin for decade after decade, and Jacob's love for her had grown more and more. Even years after this event, when Jacob was facing the waning years of his life, he remembered his great love for her and her death (Gen 48:7). This man of God had an enormous capacity to love and to love deeply. Despite all his failures and weaknesses, his heart was tender and soft, devoted and loyal. Because of this, he was capable of doing great things for God, and God was able to use Jacob.
2. Now, how did Jacob overcome the sorrow of losing his dear wife, the one whom he loved so much? By going on in the new name God had given him, the name of Israel (v. 21). Note that he is called Jacob in verse 20, but his name is immediately switched to Israel in verse 21. Remember that *Israel* means "one who strives and prevails with God." In this passage, the death of Rachel, his beloved wife, forced Jacob to draw close to God, to strive and prevail with God, to trust God for strength to face her death and to go on. God met Jacob's need. Thus Jacob continued his journey as Israel, as "one who sought and prevailed with God" (see note, Gen 32:27-28).

It is important from this point on to note when Jacob is called Israel. A special point is being made when his name is switched to Israel (see note, pt. 2, Gen 45:25-28).

**Thought 1.** When we lose a dear wife or husband, the pain is sometimes almost unbearable. Sometimes the sense of loss, sorrow, grief and loneliness seems like it will overwhelm us. God and prayer provide the answer to our need: our LORD will help us and sustain us. But we have to turn to Him even as Jacob did.

**Psa 28:7** *The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and I am helped. My heart leaps for joy and I will give thanks to him in song.*

*Psa 40:17 Yet I am poor and needy; may the LORD think of me. You are my help and my deliverer: O my God, do not delay.*

*Isa 41:10 So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.*

*Exo 33:14 The Lord replied, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."*

*Deu 33:27 The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.*

*Isa 46:4 Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you.*

## **II. Genesis 35:22a The Sin of Jacob's Son, Reuben**

There was the sin of his son.

1. Reuben was the oldest, the first-born son of Jacob. He committed a terrible sin, a horrible adulterous act against his father. He had sex with his father's concubine, Bilhah. Remember that Bilhah was the mother of two of Reuben's younger brothers, Dan and Naphtali.

Two facts strongly indicate that this was not a rape case, but an affair that both parties encouraged.

=> Bilhah was much older than Reuben and stood as one of the mothers of the family; thus she had the parental authority and was mature enough to withstand any advances by Reuben.

=> Moreover, if Bilhah were not in agreement with the affair, she would have told Jacob that Reuben had raped her. Reuben would have known this, so this alone would have kept him from even suggesting sex, much less raping Bilhah.

As stated, the sexual affair was most likely agreed to by both parties. Remember that Reuben was about thirty years old and unmarried. Bilhah was an older woman whose beauty and attractiveness had begun to fade, whose face had begun to show wrinkles and whose body had begun to lose its shape. She was probably neglected by her husband, Jacob, and felt lonely, unattractive and unwanted. Somehow she and Reuben became friendlier than they should have through conversation and began to be attracted to one another. The attraction was obvious to the other, and they soon found themselves in one another's arms and eventually in bed together.

2. When Jacob heard about the affair, he of course stopped it. What kind of rebuke and discipline he exercised is not reported, but he no doubt strongly rebuked both his son and wife.

The point is this: Jacob was bound to be torn all to pieces, his heart ripped with severe pain and grief. He had just lost his dear wife Rachel, and now this: his older son committing incest. Sorrow, pain, shame — deep hurt and embarrassment — flooded his soul. How could he cope with it all? His own son, his oldest son, had

shamed him in the most terrible way possible. His son had cut him to the core when he was already suffering and grieving over the death of his beloved wife. How could he handle it all: all the pain, hurt, grief, sorrow and shame?

Note the name used for Jacob: it is Israel. The news of the incest reached the ears of Israel. Jacob received the news in the strength of his new name. Again, the idea is that he went before God in prayer: seeking, struggling and striving with God in prayer. And he stayed there before God until he prevailed in prayer, until God heard and answered and met his need. He prayed and prayed until God eased his pain and sorrow — until God delivered his soul and strengthened him to arise and go on.

**Thought 1.** No greater sorrow or pain can grip the heart of a parent than this: a child committing some vile sin that shames or embarrasses the family. The lesson is clear: no matter what sin a child commits, no matter how wayward the child becomes, God can meet the needs of the parent. God can relieve the pain, sorrow, grief and shame. God can strengthen us to arise and go forth to meet the world and our duty within the world.

**Prov 10:1** *A wise son brings joy to his father, but a foolish son grief to his mother.*

**Prov 20:11** *Even a child is known by his actions, by whether his conduct is pure and right.*

**Prov 28:24** *Whoever robs their father or mother and says, “It’s not wrong,” is partner to one who destroys.*

**Psa 57:1** *Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me, for in you my soul takes refuge. I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings until the disaster has passed.*

**Heb 13:6** *So we say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?”*

### **III. Genesis 35:22b–27 The Tribes of Israel and the Sons of Jacob**

There was the responsibility for his children. This was a heavy responsibility, for Jacob now had thirteen children, twelve sons and one daughter. How did he handle the pressure of the responsibility? By obeying God and returning to the promised land, to the place of his great spiritual heritage.

Note: this is the first complete list of the twelve sons of Jacob, the future heads of the twelve tribes of Israel. There are at least two reasons why the list is given at this point.

1. The list is given to show the overriding power and faithfulness of God: to show how God works all things out for good in order to fulfil His purposes (see Rom 8:28-29). God had called Jacob to receive the promises of God, the great covenant made with Abraham. Up to this point, Jacob’s life and the life of his family had been, simply put, a mess. But God had stepped in to straighten the mess out. God had called and recalled Jacob to repent and change his life. And each time, Jacob had repented and turned back to God, but only temporarily. He never stuck. However, God overruled.

God stepped in time and again until He got Jacob and his family back to *the promised land*. When Jacob left the land some thirty years earlier, he was fleeing for his life because of sin, and he owned nothing but a staff. Now when he returned, God had blessed him tremendously, especially with the twelve sons who were to lead out in the fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham. How did Jacob get back to *the promised land* with these sons, sons for whom he was responsible? Not by his own efforts or works. But by the grace, forgiveness and mercy of God. God had called Jacob and worked in Jacob, making him stronger and stronger spiritually. God had worked to make Jacob so strong spiritually that Jacob had to get up and do God's will. He had to return to *the promised land*. God conquered the failures and weaknesses of Jacob by working within him and making him stronger and stronger. Thus God was faithful to His promise.

Now here stood Jacob with his twelve sons, having come to his father, Isaac. He had returned to the promised land where Abraham and Isaac had lived all their lives (v. 27). It was a dramatic moment. As Jacob and his sons stood before his father, it was God Himself who had brought them there, brought them to *the promised land* by His overriding power and faithfulness. All succeeding generations would thereby look at Jacob and know the weakness and frailty of men, even of those chosen and called by God. But they would also know the glorious grace and faithfulness of God, the grace and faithfulness that are available to any person. This was one of the major reasons why the author of Genesis here listed the twelve sons of Jacob.

2. The list is given to show that Jacob was ultimately faithful to God. Jacob truly knew God: he sincerely believed in and followed the true God of heaven and earth. Despite lapses into sin — even the terrible sins of bigamy, favouritism, deception, lying, cowardliness and stealing — Jacob sought God. He wrestled and struggled with God, and he had prevailed with God. He was, in the final analysis, obedient to God: he repented of his sins and returned to *the promised land*. And now he was there, standing with his twelve sons who were to be the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel. He stood there before his father in *the promised land* where Abraham and Isaac had stayed. He had returned to his great spiritual heritage, and he stood before his father in the strength of that spiritual heritage. It was in that strength, the strength of his spiritual heritage, that he was able to handle the responsibility of his twelve sons. This was the second major reason why the author of Genesis here listed the twelve sons of Jacob.

**Thought 1.** There is only one way to handle the heavy responsibility of children: in the LORD. We must make sure we are following the LORD to the promised land of heaven and that we are pointing our children toward heaven. The LORD is faithful, and He will work in us to strengthen us to handle whatever pressure and responsibility we bear in rearing children.

**Exo 33:14** *The Lord replied, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."*



**Deu 6:7** *Impress them [God's commandments] on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.*

**Psa 115:12** *The LORD remembers us and will bless us: He will bless the house of Israel, he will bless the house of Aaron.*

**Deu 33:27** *The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.*

**Prov 22:6** *Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.*

**Eph 6:4** *Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.*

**1 Tim 3:4** *He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect.*

**Titus 2:4** *Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure.*

**1 Pet 5:7** *Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.*

**Psa 40:17** *Yet I am poor and needy; may the Lord think of me. You are my help and my deliverer: O my God, do not delay.*

**Isa 46:4** *Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you.*

#### **IV. Genesis 35:28–29 The Death of Isaac**

There was the death of his father. Remember, this was the fourth heavy trial and duty that had confronted Jacob in this passage. Scripture is stressing the trials that confront us as believers. Jacob had just confronted and conquered three heavy trials:

- => the unexpected death of his dear wife Rachel (vv. 16-21).
  - => the terrible, shameful sin of his oldest son, Reuben: that of incest, of committing an adulterous act with Jacob's wife Bilhah (v. 22a).
  - => the heavy responsibility for his children, a responsibility that had just been driven home to his heart as he introduced and presented his children to his father, Isaac (vv. 23-27).
1. Now Jacob was to face the death of his father. Isaac died at 180 years of age. Note that he was "gathered to his people" (v. 29). This is a phrase used in the Old Testament to refer to life after death. Isaac was being gathered to be with the believers who had gone on before, gathered to life with God, to eternity (see note, pt. 3, Gen 25:7-10).
  2. Note that the reconciliation between the two brothers, Esau and Jacob, was genuine. Here they were standing together, handling all the funeral arrangements together. True reconciliation had taken place. There is a strong lesson in their reconciliation. The conflict between them was so severe that if they could be reconciled, then any

conflict can be resolved. Any two parties, no matter how severe their conflict, can be reconciled if they will only trust God to help them. How did Jacob overcome the loss of his father? First, by being reconciled to his brother, Esau, and burying their father together.

Now, the death of Isaac was no doubt a terrible loss to Jacob, for his father was the son of Abraham himself, the very first great patriarch. Jacob's father, Isaac, was only the second great patriarch to believe God and His promises. Jacob now stood all alone with no direct connection to Abraham, all alone as the third generation of great patriarchs who had trusted God and followed His promises.

Second, Jacob no doubt overcame his father's death by prayer. But third, he also overcame it by assuming the responsibility for the Israelites, by taking over as the head of the family, the spiritual head of the great patriarchal family. Jacob faced the death of his father in the strength of his spiritual heritage, a spiritual heritage that stressed a personal faith and fear of God. Note the example that Isaac had lived before Jacob: when thinking of his father, Jacob had one thing in particular to stick out in his mind: *Isaac's fear and reverence of God*. In fact, Jacob even called God "the fear of Isaac" (Gen 31:42, 53).

What a glorious example Isaac had lived before his children! Thus it was the strength of being back in his father's presence, the strength of being back in the land of his great spiritual heritage, that enabled Jacob to face his father's death.

Note this: Isaac did not actually die for twelve years after Jacob's return to his father. His death is mentioned here because the mantle of God's call, the mantle of spiritual leadership, was now to be Jacob's. Full responsibility for God's promises was now Jacob's. The centre of attention, as God fulfilled the Abrahamic covenant, was to focus upon Jacob and his twelve sons. The historical significance of Isaac's life was over; thus it was now time to mention his death.

**Thought 1:** How do we overcome the pain of losing our father, mother or any other loved one? By prayer and by getting to the responsibility at hand, to the fulfilling of our own call and duty upon earth. Once our loved ones have passed on, they can accomplish nothing more upon earth. But we can, and there is much to do to make our earth a better place to live and to help our fellow citizens conquer death and the judgment to come. There is only one way we can so help them: by proclaiming life everlasting that is found in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. He had died for them, even as He has for us. We must, therefore, do as Isaac did with Jacob, and Jacob with his family: proclaim the faith, the great promises of God.

(1) There is *the promised land of heaven* which we can inherit, the promised land where we can be gathered to our people and live forever with them and God.

**John 3:16** "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

**John 14:1-3** “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.”

**2 Cor 5:1** Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.

**Col 1:5** From the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel.

**Heb 11:10** For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

**Heb 11:13-16** All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country — a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

(2) There is the *promised seed*, a great nation of believers that God is building. And there is the very special *promised seed of the Saviour*, the LORD Jesus Christ, who has come to save the world.

**Gal 3:16** The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say “and to seeds,” meaning many people, but “and to your seed,” meaning one person, who is Christ.

**Luke 2:11** Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.

**Luke 19:10** “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”

**John 3:17-18** “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”

**Acts 5:31** God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel.

**1 Pet 2:24** “He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.”

**1 Pet 3:18** For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit.

**Isa 53:5** But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. ■