



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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No More Compromise

Genesis 35:1-15

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How do we approach God? And what's our motivation when we come to him? Do we come to God because we want something from him? Do we come to him because we think he owes us something? And when we worship him, whether by "worship" we think of singing and praying at church, giving him tithes and offerings, or simply being obedient to his will, are we offering that worship with the expectation that God will give us something in return? Are we worshipping him *so that* he will give us something in return? And when we worship, are we doing it on God's terms or our own? These are all questions that surround the story of Jacob as his faith develops in Genesis.

Jacob started with little or no personal fellowship with God; he just knew the promises of blessing that God had made to his father and grandfather. He had faith that God would make good on those promises, but it was the promises that interested Jacob, not the God who had made them. As God worked in Jacob's life and as he made good on his promises, Jacob's faith grew bit by bit. And by the time we see him fleeing Laban and righting the wrongs he had done to Esau, we see how personal fellowship with God had grown into a greater degree of trust—into deeper faith. And yet, we still see that Jacob's falling short. From his shining example of faith in his confrontation with Esau, Jacob fell into compromise at Shechem. He settled for worldly prosperity and security rather than following God and fulfilling his vow at Bethel. We saw Jacob setup his misplaced altar at Shechem, as if he could placate God and make up for his worldliness by offering him compromised and disobedient worship. Jacob's faith still has a lot of room to grow. But before we condemn him, we should remember that we often

do the same thing. We compromise with the world during the week and then think we can please God with token acts of obedience or by singing praises, praying, and bringing our tithes on Sunday. Brothers and sisters, that's not the sort of faith that God is working to build in us. That's a faith that's interested not so much in God—in fellowshiping with him and in giving him the glory he is due simply for being God and for redeeming us from sin—that's a faith that's interested in obtaining God's blessings for their own sake.

The rebuke that Simeon and Levi gave their father at the end of Chapter 34 summarises Jacob's faith so far. Remember that because of Jacob's compromise with the world, his daughter, Dinah, had been sucked into the sinful ways of the Canaanites. She'd been raped by the king's son, who then tried to buy off Jacob and his sons by being circumcised with the men of his town. While they were convalescing, Simeon and Levi had murdered them—all of them to the last man—and sacked the city. Jacob rebuked them, not because he was morally outraged at the barbaric murder they had committed, but because they had made enemies of the Canaanites. They responded to him with moral outrage: "Should Shechem treat our sister like a prostitute?" The story ends with that last word hanging over Jacob's head. In the end, the story of Dinah's rape and the murder of the Shechemite men stands as a metaphor for Jacob's faith. The whole sad event had happened because Jacob had been treating God like a prostitute. He thought he could compromise with the world and then obtain God's blessing or God's pardon through half-hearted and compromised worship and obedience.

To put a slightly different spin on a question Corrie ten Boom once asked: "Is God your steering wheel or is he your spare tire?" Is he the driving factor in your life? Or do you just keep him around in case your own plans fail? Is your goal in life to honour God for who he is and for the life he has given you? Or is he just a fire insurance policy that you can pull out of your pocket at the Last Judgement? This is the difference between true faith and paganism. Think

back to the tower of Babel. The actions of the people there illustrated the heart of paganism: a desire to control and to manipulate God. Paganism tries to obtain God's blessings by giving him the things we think he wants so that we can put God in our debt. Real faith, in stark contrast, offers God worship, service, and obedience simply for who he is—not out of obligation, but out of gratitude for the amazing love, mercy, and grace he has poured into our lives. Paganism is focused on God's blessing as an end in itself; real faith is focused on God. Real faith, even in the midst of suffering and loss, can say with Job that God is enough: "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him" (Job 13:15 NKJV).

Think of the tax receipts you receive each year in return for your charitable donations, whether to the church or to other organisations. Those receipts are legally required to state you received no tangible goods in return for your donations. Contrast that with your property taxes. Those taxes pay for local infrastructure, for schools and hospitals, and for fire and police service. You'd be justifiably upset if you paid your property taxes, but the school refused to enrol your children, if the fire department refused to come when your house was burning, or if the city refused to clean out the stopped up storm drain flooding your street. You pay your taxes with the expectation that you'll get something in return.

Now think about the offerings you give to God. Do you come to church, do you tithe, do you obey his commands expecting something in return—as if you're paying taxes? Or do you offer him all these things out of gratitude and because you know that all your blessings have come from him in the first place as your Creator and Sustainer? Do you serve God with a thankful heart, expecting nothing in return, simply because he has already given so much? You see, one of these postures treats God like a prostitute; the other treats him as the truly loving God that he is.

That rebuking question of Simeon and Levi at the end of Chapter 34 is the lens through which we should see Chapter 35. It's the question in the back of

Jacob's mind as God calls to him once again. Is Jacob being a spiritual Shechem: taking God's blessings and then trying to buy him off with compromised obedience? Look at verse 1:

God said to Jacob, "Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there. Make an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau."

Every time God calls, he offers a fresh opportunity to follow him. One of the remarkable things about God is that he doesn't give up on his people. We may have responded to his past calls with disobedience or, like Jacob, with delayed or partial obedience, but God still calls. He continues to work in our lives. He continues to pour his grace into us. And even though it takes a long time for our faith to mature, he keeps giving us new opportunities to follow. This time, he calls to Jacob: "Arise, go up to Bethel. Remember that promise you made to me. I've seen you through your exile and I've seen you safely home. I've made peace between you and your brother. I'm not a deal-making God, but you did make a vow; isn't it time you fulfilled it?"

"Arise, go up." That's the language of worship. The Israelites always described their pilgrimages to Jerusalem for the great festivals in terms of "going up" to the city and the temple. God is calling Jacob to leave behind his altar of compromise at Shechem—and with it all the other compromising aspects of his life of faith—and to worship God with his whole heart. And this time, Jacob follows as he should have all along.

So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, "Put away the foreign gods that are among you and purify yourselves and change your garments. Then let us arise and go up to Bethel, so that I may make there an altar to the God who answers me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone." So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods that they had, and the rings that were in their ears. Jacob hid them under

the terebinth tree that was near Shechem. (Genesis 35:2-4)

Jacob finally exercised the headship over his family that he should have so many years before. Much of the damage has already been done, but in response to God's call, he gathers his family and prepares them to meet God at Bethel. There are two parts to this. The first involves removing from their family the very things that have compromised their faith. The second is to purify themselves from the defilement brought about by their past compromise. In this case, we see what's been hinted at before. There was more to Jacob's compromise than just wanting the safety and economic advantage that came with being close to the city of Shechem. Long before they arrived in Canaan, the family was worshipping foreign gods. We had a hint of this when Rachel stole her father's idols and this suggests that she did so, not out of spite, but because she believed they had actual power—that the gods they represented were real and because she was worshipping them in addition to the Lord. Chances are that the family acquired more idols and presented themselves to more false gods while they were at Shechem. Idols made out of gold and silver would have been part of the spoils they took after conquering the city. The earrings they wore were most likely magical charms or symbols that represented their devotion to those pagan gods.

Brothers and sisters, compromise with the world usually has its root in compromise with God. If we are wholly devoted to God, it's difficult to even consider compromise with the world, the flesh, and the devil. That whole devotion to God is at the heart of our baptism vows. Consider the vows taken in our names by our parents and sponsors or taken yourself if you were baptised as an adult. The priest asked: "Do you renounce the devil and all his works, the vain pomp and glory of the world, with all covetous desires of the same, and the sinful desires of the flesh, so that you will not follow, nor be led by them?" And we responded: "I renounce them all." We've taken the vow, but have we been faithful to it? Or have we

compromised as Jacob did? If our faith is spread thin, if God is our spare tire and not our steering wheel, if he's just one backup plan amongst many, worldly compromise will follow as naturally as night follows day. And so Jacob strikes at the root of the problem and, with his children, purges his household of everything that represents their devotion to any god but God.

Then, having made a spiritual purge of their household, Jacob and his family purify themselves, put off their old clothes, and put on new ones. They ritually washed themselves—probably in ways very similar to the ritual purification washings we see later in the law—which represented the washing away of past sin—and then they changed their clothes—something that symbolised taking up a new way of life. This is always the way of faith. On Pentecost, St. Peter preached the saving message of the Gospel and when the men there believed and asked how they should respond, Peter told them, "Repent and be baptised for the forgiveness of your sins." Repent: put aside and turn from your old ways and from your sin. Be baptised: be washed—be purified—in the name of Jesus and your sins and the guilt that goes with them will be removed. It's through repentance and that act of faith in the Saviour that we can then enter the presence of God and stand before him. And just so, Jacob and his family repent, they put off the old and put on the new, they are purified, and having done that they finally go to Bethel—to the "House of God"—where they can worship at his altar before his holy presence.

And as they journeyed, a terror from God fell upon the cities that were around them, so that they did not pursue the sons of Jacob. And Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel), which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him, and there he built an altar and called the place El-bethel, because there God had revealed himself to him when he fled from his brother. (Genesis 35:6-7)

In Chapter 34, Jacob compromised his faith, he settled with the Canaanites, and

because his family responded to sin with sin, at the end of the episode we were left with Jacob living in fear of the Canaanites. Now Jacob repents of his compromise, travels to Bethel—where he should have been all along—and builds his promised altar. Because he walks in faith, God takes care of him. As a result of his compromise, Jacob was left living in fear of the Canaanite. Now, because he has chosen to walk in obedience, God reverses everything and puts a fear of Jacob into those same Canaanites. And so Jacob arrives at Bethel and exchanges his false and half-hearted worship for the real thing.

And where compromise with the world had brought disaster on Jacob's family and a discrediting of his witness, God now comes to Jacob to confirm his promises. Look at verses 9-13:

God appeared to Jacob again, when he came from Paddan-aram, and blessed him. And God said to him, "Your name is Jacob; no longer shall your name be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name." So he called his name Israel. And God said to him, "I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply. A nation and a company of kings shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body. The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you." Then God went up from him in the place where he had spoken with him. (Genesis 35:9-13)

God responds to Jacob's faithful worship with blessing. The blessing begins with a reaffirmation of Israel as Jacob's new name. God had given him a new name and a new identity the night before he met Esau and that next day, Jacob had confronted his brother in faith as Israel. But from that act of faith, he slid back into his old Jacob ways. Now, as Jacob steps out in a stronger and purer faith, God reminds him of his new identity—he reminds him of the new life he's given. But God does more than remind Jacob of who he is. He comes as "God Almighty"—as *'el šadday*—and he renews his covenant. This time God reaches all the way back to his blessing

on Adam and Eve and brings forward his Creation blessing: "be fruitful and multiply". It's interesting that God speaks this blessing over a man who already has eleven sons. God speaks to Jacob as the biological and spiritual father of a whole family of nations and in that God points all the way through the Old Covenant and into the New—to a time in the future when his Church will no longer be restricted to the Jewish people, but opened through the Messiah to the entire world. God then points to that Messiah as he recalls the promise of kings. That line will begin with Saul and David and Solomon, but that line ends with Jesus Christ, the eternal king for whom all those other sons of Jacob simply held the throne as they waited for his coming. And finally, God reaffirms the promise of the land to Jacob, who is still a sojourner.

Jacob compromised his faith when he settled at Shechem and the result was calamity. When he responded to God's call in obedient and willing faith, God responded with blessing. That's not to say that God is a divine vending machine that responds mechanically—that we can do "this" and always expect "that" response from him. But it is a reminder to us that God is always working to bring us into the centre of his will. It's a reminder to us that we should never let our faith stagnate—we should always be growing and seeking to follow God more closely. And more than anything else, Jacob reminds us that the object and focal point of our faith should never be the things God offers us—no matter how wonderful they are—but that our eyes and our hearts should be on him alone.

In verses 14 and 15 we see Jacob's response to God.

And Jacob set up a pillar in the place where he had spoken with him, a pillar of stone. He poured out a drink offering on it and poured oil on it. So Jacob called the name of the place where God had spoken with him Bethel.

This may well be the same pillar that Jacob had set up back in Chapter 28

when God had met him on the same site and where Jacob had made his vow to come back and build an altar. Jacob had delayed his obedience for at least a decade and during that time the stone had fallen, not unlike his obedience. And yet as God responds to Jacob's fulfilled vow by giving a blessing, Jacob dusts off that old pillar, stands it back up, and anoints it with oil as a sign of the grace that God had shown to him. That stone stood as a reminder to him of God's covenant faithfulness.

Brothers and sisters, we have our own pillars of remembrance. Whenever you make the sign of the cross at the name of the Holy Trinity, it should be a reminder to you that in your baptism God has marked you as his own and included you in his covenant of grace. When we come to the Lord's Table each Sunday, the bread and wine here are gifts of God, given as a tangible sign and seal of our new life and union with Jesus Christ. And God doesn't give us bare signs and symbols of remembrance. He gives us *sacraments*: outward signs and seals of very real inward and spiritual graces. They are signs and seals that we can see, touch, taste, smell, and hear in order to be sure and certain of the new life God has given. The baptismal font and the Lord's Table are our pillars, they're our Bethels. Here God meets us and gives us grace to follow when he calls and to walk with him in obedience. In Baptism and in his Supper he reminds us that he gave his only-begotten Son that we might have life—that he gave his all for our sake—and in that he calls us to give him our all, not for the sake of his blessing, but out of heartfelt gratitude for the amazing love he has shown to us.

Let us pray as we prayed in our Collect: "LORD of all power and might, the author and giver of all good things: Graft in our hearts the love of your Name; increase in us true religion; nourish us with all goodness; and bring forth in us the fruit of good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*"