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COURSE CORRECTION

SERIES: WRESTLING WITH GOD: THE JACOB NARRATIVE

By Scott Grant

Stuck in Tijuana

Some years ago I was one of the drivers in a caravan of vans that was carrying teen-agers to Ensenada, Mexico, for a week of ministry. After crossing the border, I made a wrong turn and ended up in Tijuana. Not knowing enough Spanish to ask for directions to get back on the highway, I stuck my head out of the window with the intention of saying, “Donde esta Ensendada (Where is Ensenada)?”

However, I had just returned from a vacation in Italy before embarking on the trip to Mexico. The little Italian that I learned for that trip was still rolling around in my mind. So I asked, “Douve Ensenada?” which in Italian means (I think), “Where Ensenada?” Needless to say, the person I spoke with was baffled.

At that particular moment, I needed a little course correction. Correction: I needed a lot of course correction. I wanted to go to Ensenada, but I ended up in Tijuana.

Jacob was on his way to Bethel, but he ended up in Shechem. In Shechem, Jacob’s daughter was raped. He did nothing about it, so he lost the respect of his sons, who slaughtered the men of Shechem and looted the city. Instead of being a blessing to the nations, as a carrier of the Abrahamic Covenant, Jacob was a curse.

The story of how God met him, and of how Jacob picked himself up, gives us a map for resuming our spiritual journeys on the heels of spiritual failure.

As the Jacob narrative comes to a close in Genesis 35, Jacob comes first to Bethel and then to Hebron, where his father was residing. The final legs of his journey were anticipated by his vow in Genesis 28:20-22.

Jacob resumes his journey

Then God said to Jacob, “Arise, go up to Bethel and live there, and make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau.” So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, “Put away the foreign gods which are among you, and purify yourselves and change your garments; and let us arise and go up to Bethel, and I will make an

altar there to God, who answered 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 which they had and the rings which were in their ears, and Jacob hid them under the oak which was near Shechem.

As they journeyed, there was a great terror upon the cities which were around them, and they did not pursue the sons of Jacob. So Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel), which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him. He built an altar there, and called the place El-bethel, because there God had revealed Himself to him when he fled from his brother. Now Deborah, Rebekah’s nurse, died, and she was buried below Bethel under the oak; it was named Allon-bacuth. (Genesis 35:1-8)

God speaks to Jacob, who is badly in need of course correction after his stumble in Shechem. Jacob must not need to be reminded of his failure, for God doesn’t even mention it. The command to return to Bethel and make an altar would remind Jacob of the vow he made there to make the Lord his God in response to the Lord’s promises to be with him, protect him and bring him back to the land of Canaan.

He must “go up” to worship at Bethel, gaining 1,000 feet in elevation, as pilgrims would later go up to worship in Jerusalem (Psalm 24:3). After sinking to another low in Shechem, Jacob must make a spiritual ascent.

When he came to Bethel the first time, he was fleeing from his brother Esau, who wanted to kill him. Faith will be required for this journey, for Jacob is now afraid of the inhabitants of the land after his sons slaughtered the Hivites (Genesis 34:30).

Jacob knows he must do something before moving to Bethel. He and his family have been defiled by the rape of the city of Shechem. So Jacob calls his family to repentance. In addition to the household idols that Rachel took from her father, Jacob’s caravan had evidently accumulated other idols along the way. The people must forsake those idols, undergo ritual purification for the defilement of Shechem and change their garments in commemoration of a new way of life.

Jacob, acknowledging that God has fulfilled his promises, will now lead a pilgrimage to Bethel, which is the place where God met him when he had little to hope for in life. Jacob becomes a worship leader. He also collects the idols and hides them under an oak, giving them a proper burial.

God continues to bless Jacob with his protection. The surrounding cities were just as afraid of Jacob as he was of them, so they refrained from attacking him. They evidently feared that a god was with Jacob, just as the inhabitants of Jericho would later be terror-stricken because of the Lord’s presence with Israel (Joshua 2:10-11).

The narrator refers to Jacob’s destination by both its old name (Luz) and its new name (Bethel), reminding readers of God’s appearance to Jacob that prompted the change. Jacob returns not as the lonely individual of an earlier era, for the narrator takes note of “all the people who were with him.” He has come to the same place, but he’s a different man.

Jacob builds the altar in obedience to the Lord. He gives the city yet another name, “El-Bethel,” which means “God of the House of God.” The additional name represents an intensification that acknowledges not so much the significance of the place but the significance of God. He gives the place this name not so much because it is special but because “God had revealed himself” to Jacob there.

The mention of the death and burial of Deborah, Rebekah’s nurse, whose name has not been mentioned

in Genesis to this point, leaves readers with the question: “What about Rebekah?” Rebekah was expecting to send for Jacob, her beloved son, only a few days after he left for Haran, but she apparently died before seeing him again (Genesis 28:44-45). By giving Deborah a place of honor, and skipping over Rebekah’s death, the narrator is rendering his verdict on Rebekah’s deceitfulness (Genesis 27:5-17).

The oak under which Deborah is buried is named Allon-bacuth, which means “Oak of Weeping.” We’re left with the impression that Jacob’s tears wouldn’t be so much for Deborah, but for a mother he would never see again.

Making a spiritual ascent

Sometimes, we wander off course without knowing it. When we become part of something like the debacle of Shechem, we realize we took a wrong turn somewhere. When such a realization grips us, we may be tempted to subject ourselves to self-flagellation or wallow in self-pity, neither of which helps us get back on track. God tells us, as he told Jacob, “Arise, go . . .”

We must pick ourselves up and get moving in the right direction. Reconnecting with God’s promises, which led us to commit ourselves to him in the first place, helps us to do so—God promises, *in Christ*, to protect us and bring us safely into the new Promised Land, the new creation.

In resuming our journey, we make a spiritual ascent. Through our own lethargy, we got stuck in the valley of Shechem, so to speak. Now the mountain looms before us, and we must climb it. As we climb higher, our hearts beat faster, the air gets fresher and the view gets clearer.

Faith is necessary to make an ascent on the heels of failure. If Jacob was afraid that his failure could incite the Canaanites, we may be afraid that our failure disqualifies us from even attempting such an ascent. To trust that God is still with you after your failure is a step of faith. Seen from this perspective, failure can serve as a foothold as we climb the mountain.

Before we resume our journey, there is a place for mourning our sin and its effect, without subjecting ourselves to self-flagellation or wallowing in self-pity. Many of us use failure as an excuse for staying in Shechem instead of taking the risky journey to Bethel. If we ended up in some kind of spiritual Shechem, we’ve probably incorporated some other gods into our worship. The values of whatever culture we live in have a pervasive influence. The other gods are burdensome, so we must put them away and give them a proper burial. Put away materialism, consumerism, pride, libertarianism and sensuality. Doing something to symbolize the burial of foreign gods can be a helpful exercise.

If we’ve defiled ourselves, we must purify ourselves. We do this by coming to the cross of Christ, by letting his blood cleanse us. Symbolism helps in this aspect also, particularly the symbolism of the Lord’s table. (This story does not give us license, however, to go shopping for new clothes so that we might change our garments to commemorate a new way of life!)

When you resume your spiritual pilgrimage, you make sure you travel with some companions. We climb the mountain together, not as individuals, because we can’t make it on our own. If we try to do it by ourselves, we’ll never make it to Bethel. We’ll end up back in Shechem. Maybe, if our experience has been somewhat like Jacob’s, we can even become leaders in the pilgrimage. Our experience with failure can serve to connect us all the more deeply with God’s grace and make us all the more fit to be worship leaders.

Here's the most remarkable thing about failure that comes out of this story: Our failure, even our moral failure, can actually work to our advantage. Jacob expected the debacle of Shechem to incite the Canaanites, but it actually paralyzed them. Who knows how God's grace can turn our missteps into advantages? What a God!

The apostle Paul says that "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more." We therefore might think of asking the question that Paul himself asks next: "What shall we say them? Are we to continue in sin that grace might increase?" His answer: "May it never be!" (Romans 5:20-6:1). If you think that grace gives you license to sin, then you haven't understood grace.

As you climb higher, some current experience may remind you of a prior experience. But like Jacob, you have come to this place as a different man, as a different woman. The similar present experience, therefore, serves to show you how far God has taken you. You don't think the way you used to think. You don't worship the way you used to worship. You don't struggle the way you used to struggle. Sometimes, it takes a similar experience that reminds you of a prior experience to illustrate just how far you've come.

The current experience, then, may actually be an intensification of your earlier experience. Earlier, a certain place was significant. Now, the God who led you to that place is even more meaningful to you.

When you get stuck in your spiritual journey, the important thing, from the perspective of verses 1 through 8, is to get moving again. When I ended up in Tijuana, I couldn't just park the van on the side of the road, beat myself up and cry, "Woe is me." I had a van full of kids that were counting on me to lead them to Ensenada. I had to find a way to get back on the road, even if it meant making a fool of myself by asking a Mexican for directions in broken Italian. You must get moving again; others need your leadership.

Jacob worships at Bethel

Then God appeared to Jacob again when he came from Paddan-aram, and He blessed him. God said to him,

"Your name is Jacob;

You shall no longer be called Jacob,

But Israel shall be your name."

Thus He called him Israel.

God also said to him,

"I am God Almighty;

Be fruitful and multiply;

A nation and a company of nations shall come from you,

And kings shall come forth from you.

The land which I gave to Abraham and Isaac,

I will give it to you,

And I will give the land to your descendants after you.”

Then God went up from him in the place where He had spoken with him.

Jacob set up a pillar in the place where He had spoken with him, a pillar of stone, and he poured out a drink offering on it; he also poured oil on it. So Jacob named the place where God had spoken with him, Bethel. (Genesis 35:9-15)

Once again, God appears to Jacob at Bethel. The narrator has already described Bethel as being “in the land of Canaan” (verse 6). Now he connects the timing of God’s appearance to Jacob as being “when he came from Paddan-aram.” These descriptions echo Genesis 33:18: “Now Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, when he came from Paddan-aram, and camped before the city.”

Jacob’s stay in Shechem was disastrous. The narrator implies on the one hand that Jacob should have pressed on to Bethel, but on the other hand that God is giving Jacob a fresh start in the Promised Land.

God’s appearance to Jacob this time at Bethel is not only reminiscent of his earlier appearance there but also of his appearance at Peniel. At Peniel, God appeared as a man and changed Jacob’s name to Israel (Genesis 32:28). Jacob’s original name came to be associated with his conniving nature. When he wrestled with God, he finally confessed that his name was Jacob, the conniver. His new name, Israel, which implied a new destiny, was a reminder that his strength was in his weakness and in his dependence on God.

Now, after Jacob’s name has been changed to Israel, God appears to him not as a man but directly and says to him, “Your name is Jacob.” At Shechem, Jacob acted like Jacob, not Israel. God, then, reaffirms the new destiny despite Jacob’s failure and thereby challenges him to live in a way that befits his new name. God’s “renaming” of Jacob at Bethel is more personal than it was at Peniel, which serves to intensify God’s reaffirmation of him.

In verses 11 and 12, God affirms that Jacob is the carrier of the Abrahamic Covenant, summing up and even expanding the earlier promises of Genesis 28:3-4 and 13-15. God treated Abraham in a similar way when he re-articulated his promises to him in Genesis 17:1-8. The future of humanity is still with Jacob, Abraham’s grandson, despite his checkered past, even his recent checkered past.

Jacob went up to worship God at Bethel; now God, having descended to meet with Jacob, goes up from Bethel. No matter how high Jacob ascends, God still must descend to meet with him.

When Jacob first came to Bethel, then called Luz, it was a “certain place” of no distinction. But after God appeared to Jacob there, Jacob named it Bethel, which means “House of God,” because God was “in this place” (Genesis 28:11, 16). It is God’s presence that is significant, and only his presence makes a place significant. The word “place,” which appeared five times in Genesis 28:10-22, appears three times in Genesis 35:13-15, reminding readers of Jacob’s first visit to this place.

For Jacob, this place has special significance, because God has appeared to him twice here. So he does what he did when God first appeared to him and blessed him. When Jacob came to Bethel the first time,

he used a stone for a pillow. It was a lonely, hard place. But after God appeared to him, Jacob converted the stone into a pillar and poured oil on top of it, commemorating God's presence there. So he sets up another pillar and consecrates it in a similar manner.

Jacob remembers how desperate he was. He remembers how God showed up when he needed him most. So he worships in the same way, remembering how God has sustained him since then. He is not a man who has forgotten where he's come from. He commemorates the latest appearance of the Lord in a way that recollects the first appearance. Stones were also part of Jacob's journey when he arrived in Haran and when he left Haran (Genesis 29:10, 31:14). It's been a hard life. But God has been with him. So at Bethel, Jacob gathers up two-plus decades of memories and worships the Lord with them.

Bethel looms large in Jacob's psyche. It is, in a sense, his spiritual home, a place he keeps returning to, in actuality and in thought.

Conspicuous by its absence this time is a vow. Jacob does not vow to make the Lord his God in return for the fulfillment of promises. He knows the Lord has fulfilled his promises. Jacob *has* made the Lord his God. This time, he came to Bethel as a worshiper, and he will leave as a worshiper.

A fresh start

What do you do with the realization that you should have done something differently? You can't go back and do it again. You can't change what you did—or didn't do—in Shechem. But God's appearance at Bethel assures us that he wants to give us a fresh start. As a carrier of the New Covenant, which fulfills the Abrahamic Covenant, you haven't lost your calling. You still have a job to share the life of God with others. The time for moping around is past. The time for worship has come.

When you become a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, you receive a new identity and a new destiny. God himself often affirms that identity and destiny at different times after you've begun following Jesus. Then, maybe, like Jacob, you fail, and you think you should be further along by now.

Then somehow, God comes along and reaffirms your identity and your destiny just at the moment you're thinking about what might have been if you had made better choices. It is a powerful thing to sense God's affirmation; it is an even more powerful thing to sense God's reaffirmation at a time when you are all too aware of your shortcomings.

When reaffirmation comes in this more personal way, it challenges us to live in a way that befits our identity and our destiny. It reconnects us with God's promises in a more intense, expansive way. We appreciate to a greater degree that God is changing, and will change, everything, and that he's using us—yes, us!—as his agents of change.

God has a future for the world. Where is that future? It's right here, in this room, and in millions of others like it, whether they are towering cathedrals that pierce the sky or thatched-roof huts that barely get off the ground. Wherever the people of God are gathered, the future of humanity is in that place. We who follow Jesus are the carriers of the covenant, which means we are the carriers of Christ, despite our checkered past, even our recent checkered past. The future of humanity is with all us Jacobs who carry Christ to the world.

When you arrive at someplace like Bethel, which reminds you of a previous encounter with God, remember how desperate you were. Remember how the Lord showed up when you needed him most. Remember how he has sustained you since then. Let us not be people who forget where we've come

from. Let us not forget that God has transformed hard places into places of worship. Gather up your memories and worship the Lord with them. This time, you have come to this place as a worshiper, and you will leave as a worshiper.

David Wilcox captures the flavor of Jacob's experience, as it relates to us, in his song *Step Into Your Skin*:

Take your situation, all your circumstances,

Put it on you like it's made to fit you right

Take your friends and family, take the mile around you

Take the time that's left and step inside your life

Slip it like a glove around you

Don't you miss this love that's found you

Look at all that's real

Climb in, wear it a like a suit around your heart

You've been thinking you could not be where you are

Every morning don't be thinking where you might have been

Every morning, shake it out and step into your skin

There is no mistaking, this is where you've got to

Here's the life that you have dragged around so far

'Cause you could stretch it out and make it fit you better

If you put it on and start with where you are

Don't be halfway out and dreaming

Don't be lost in doubt and scheming

Look at all that's real

Climb in, wear it a like a suit around your heart

You've been thinking you could not be where you are

Every morning don't be thinking where you might have been

Every morning, shake it out and step into your skin. (1)

You have a life that you've dragged around. Maybe you've dragged it through Shechem. But don't miss the love of God that's found you. Don't be thinking where you might have been. Instead, start where you are. Step into your skin.

Church of Jacobs

Spiritual failure does not disqualify us from the spiritual journey. In fact, Genesis 35:1-15 encourages us to mount a spiritual ascent on the heels of spiritual failure. If we do so, we'll have plenty of company—a church full of men and women who identify with Jacob and his failure. So let's all join hands and journey up the mountain together. Arise; let us go up to Bethel.

NOTES:

(1) David Wilcox, *Step Into Your Skin*, © 2000 by Midnight Ocean Bonfire Music.

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