



series: [The Jacob Narrative](#)
previous message: [Course Correction](#)

formats: [mp3](#)

THE JOURNEY HOME

SERIES: WRESTLING WITH GOD: THE JACOB NARRATIVE

By Scott Grant

Hope and sorrow

One of the oldest and most powerful conceits in western literature is the journey home. It began with Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey*, written sometime before 700 B.C., which describes the 10-year voyage of Odysseus after the fall of Troy. We just can't help re-writing that story. In recent years it's showed up in two major motion pictures, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and *Cold Mountain*, based on Charles Frazier's novel.

In this literary strain, the journey home is powered by hope but marred by sorrow. Such sentiment is reflected in this song:

I wandered again to my home in the mountain

Where in youth's early dawn I was happy and free

I looked for my friends, but I never could find 'em

I found they were all rank strangers to me (1)

Home, it seems, is never quite what we want it to be. We are therefore moved to think of home differently. Our home is with our heavenly Father and with his Son, Jesus.

In Genesis 35:16-29, Jacob completes the final leg of his journey. He comes home to his father. In the previous passage, Jacob buried Deborah, his mother's nurse, under a tree called Allon-bacuth, which means "Oak of Weeping," but the sadness of Jacob's journey home was just beginning. His journey is not unlike that of Odysseus.

Jacob's painful journey

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. When she was in severe labor the midwife said to her, "Do not fear, for now you have another son." It came about as her soul was departing (for she died), that she named him Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin. So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem). Jacob set up a pillar over her grave; that is the pillar of Rachel's grave to this day. Then Israel journeyed on and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder. 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.

(Genesis 35:16-22a)

After encountering God in Bethel the first time, Jacob hoped to return to his father's house. His father is now living in Hebron, 30 miles south of Bethel, so Jacob begins the final leg of his return trip. After coming to Bethel the first time, Jacob found strength for his journey to Haran. Now, after coming to Bethel the second time, Jacob finds strength for the journey home. Jacob would need such strength, for the final miles of his journey would be marked with sorrow as Rachel, Jacob's favored wife, suffers a particularly difficult labor. Her midwife, perhaps unaware that Rachel's life was in danger, endeavors to cheer her with the news that she has given birth to a son, but Rachel dies shortly thereafter.

Attentive readers will be reminded of earlier episodes in the Jacob narrative. When Leah was bearing children, Rachel, who was barren, came to Jacob and said, "Give me children, or else I die" (Genesis 30:1). When she finally gave birth to Joseph, she said, "May the Lord give me another son" (Genesis 30:24). After Rachel stole her father's household idols, and he accused Jacob of stealing them, Jacob said, "The one with whom you find your gods shall not live" (Genesis 31:32). The narrator has been anticipating Rachel's death in view of both her demand of Jacob and her decision to bring other gods into the Promised Land.

Rachel names her son Ben-oni, which means "Son of Sorrow." Jacob, though, cannot bear a name that will remind him of his wife's death for the rest of his life, so he calls the boy Benjamin, which means "Son of the Right"—right being the favored side. Jacob will be reminded that Benjamin is the son of Rachel, the favored one, and will hope that his son lives a favored life.

Rachel died on the way to Ephrath, which is equated with Bethlehem. The narrator takes pains to place Rachel's death in the vicinity of Bethlehem, a small city in the region of Ephrath. Later, Bethlehem would be the home of King David and also the birthplace of the Messiah (1 Samuel 17:12, Micah 5:2).

Jacob erects a pillar to memorialize Rachel. Stones have represented difficulty in Jacob's life, but also transformation. In renaming Benjamin and in setting up a pillar for Rachel, is Jacob hoping that the Lord will somehow transform this place of sorrow?

Jacob's next stop is beyond the "tower of Eder," which in Hebrew is "Migdal-eder." It was probably not a town but a tower near Bethlehem for watching over flocks.

In the vicinity of Migdal-eder, Reuben, Jacob's firstborn son, has sex with Bilhah, the maid of Rachel and the concubine of Jacob. Reuben is the son of Leah, the wife whom Jacob *didn't* love. Reuben probably resents his father's treatment of Leah and wants to ensure that Bilhah doesn't displace his mother and succeed Rachel. He also, like Simeon and Levi, must resent Jacob's indifference to Shechem's rape of Dinah, Leah's daughter and Reuben's full sister. By having sex with Bilhah in the wake of the rape of Dinah, Reuben is saying to his father, "How does it feel?" As Jacob's firstborn, Reuben is attempting to supplant his father as the leader of the family. Absalom would later behave in a similar way, having sex with his father's concubines in making a claim to leadership (2 Samuel 16:21-22).

The narrator reports that Jacob "heard of it." No doubt Reuben wanted him to hear of it. Jacob earlier "heard" that Shechem raped Dinah but did nothing about it (Genesis 34:5). Notice that Jacob has no response here, either. We're left with the impression that Jacob, though offended, is morally incapacitated. How can he object to his son's having sex with his concubine when he didn't object to a pagan's rape of his daughter? The narrator, however, leaves no doubt about the repugnant nature of incest (Genesis 9:22-27, 19:31-38; Leviticus 18:8, 20:11; Deuteronomy 27:10).

Jacob, in his last words to his sons, will finally censure Reuben (Genesis 49:4). The first three sons, Simeon, Levi and Reuben, have all disqualified themselves. Leadership in the family will pass to Judah, the next in line (Genesis 49:8-12).

Both Bethlehem and Migdal-eder would be invoked in prophecies concerning the advent of the Messiah (Micah 4:8, 5:2). Many centuries after Rachel's death, another woman would make it all the way to Bethlehem. Mary, the new Rachel, gave birth to Jesus, the Messiah. From the tower of Migdal-eder, one could have observed Mary and her newborn son.

These places, so full of anguish, showed that the family of Jacob needed a savior. The sorrow of Bethlehem and Migdal-eder were the early birth pangs preceding the coming of the Messiah. God was watching over his people, not from the tower of Migdal-eder but from a far better vantage point: heaven. He would transform these places of death and family scandal into the birthplace of eternal life.

The twelve sons

Now there were twelve sons of Jacob—the sons of Leah: Reuben, Jacob's firstborn, then Simeon and Levi and Judah and Issachar and Zebulun; the sons of Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin; and the sons of Bilhah, Rachel's maid: Dan and Naphtali; 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. (Genesis 35:22b-26)

Jacob's sons are grouped according to their mothers and according to birth order. The sons of Jacob's wives are listed before the sons of the concubines. The sons of Leah, though she was the less favored wife, are listed first because Jacob married her first. The sons of Bilhah are listed before the sons of Zilpah because Bilhah gave birth first.

Reuben, who debased himself in the previous scene, is identified as "Jacob's firstborn." The narrator of Genesis is concerned to show how God is not bound by societal conventions and at times passes over the firstborn. The word "firstborn" is particularly significant in the Jacob narrative. Esau was born first, but the birthright and the blessing passed to Jacob. Jacob wanted to marry Rachel, Laban's firstborn daughter, but was deceived into marrying her sister, Leah. Jacob would learn from the blessings and struggles of his own life and grant preeminence to younger sons (Genesis 48:13-20, Genesis 49:3-12). We should also hope that we too can learn from the blessings and struggles in our lives to ignore social conventions when necessary.

The narrator notes that these sons were born in Paddan-aram. (Benjamin was not born in Paddan-aram, but the narrator overlooks this in favor of stylistic concerns.) Abraham, on his journey from Ur, passed through Paddan-aram on his way to the Promised Land. Now Jacob, his grandson, returns to the Promised Land with 12 sons, the patriarchs of the 12 tribes of Israel. The return of Jacob sets the stage for future returns of the people of God from captivity in Egypt and Babylon, respectively.

When John the Baptist baptizes Israelites in the Jordan River, he's calling them to a greater return from exile. The Messiah himself would lead them into the presence of God and ultimately to the new heavens and new earth.

The birth of the 12 sons marked the center point of the Jacob narrative. Now, as the narrative draws to a close, their names are listed. This is what the narrator wants his readers to know: God has overcome huge obstacles, including those posed by Jacob himself, to give birth to his people. He also sets the stage for Jacob's sons, whose lives will be featured in the final narrative sequence of Genesis. Like their father, they will stand in the way of God's plan to rescue the world, but God will not turn back. Nothing

will stand in God's way, not even a disobedient church.

Jacob returns to his father

Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre of Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had sojourned. Now the days of Isaac were one hundred and eighty years. 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. (Genesis 35:27-29)

When we last heard from Isaac he was living in Beersheba (Genesis 28:10). He has since moved north to Hebron. The narrator identifies Hebron in the same way that he identified Bethel and Bethlehem, emphasizing its significance (Genesis 35:6, 19). The narrator reminds readers of Abraham's travels in Hebron, where God made his greatest promises to the patriarch (Genesis 13:14-18, Genesis 15-18).

This scene has been anticipated since Jacob left his father more than 20 years ago. Returning to his father was so important to Jacob that he conditioned his vow on it (Genesis 28:21). The narrator reports that Jacob "came to his father." When Jacob pretended to be his brother in order to obtain the patriarchal blessing, he also "came to his father" (Genesis 27:18). At Beersheba, Jacob obtained the blessing, but at a price. He had to endure the torture of hearing his father praise him only because he thought he was someone else. Jacob's escapade earned the wrath of his brother, so he had to flee to Haran.

When Jacob returned from Haran and "came near to his brother," they embraced and wept (Genesis 33:3-4). Since then, Jacob's journey home has been marred by sorrow. The mother who adored him has passed from the scene and is not present to welcome him home. Perhaps now more than ever, Jacob needs the father who has never been there for him.

Have years of separation opened Isaac's heart to his son? Jacob comes to his father, as he did 20 years ago, as he came to Esau. The narrator, having drawn us to the edge of our seats, tells us this: "Now the days of Isaac were 180 years." What? No reunion? No embrace? No tears? The climax is actually an *anticlimax*.

The narrator left us with more reason to believe that Jacob would be reconciled to his father than to his brother—Isaac didn't love him, but Esau *hated* him. Nevertheless, Esau embraces him, and his father's response is not worth reporting. Jacob received from his brother what he hoped for from his father.

Jesus draws on the lives of Isaac, Jacob and Esau to tell a similar story in which a father embraces his younger son while his older son remains aloof (Luke 15:11-32). In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the father illustrates Jesus himself, who represents his heavenly Father. What Jacob wants from his father he can only get from the God of his father. And, whether he knows it or not, he's already got it.

Isaac only blessed Jacob because he posed as Esau, but God blesses Jacob because...well, he just blesses him.

Jacob's arrival at Bethel, not Hebron, marked the end of his journey. Jacob vowed to make the Lord his God if certain conditions were met. The Lord, by bringing Jacob back to his father's house, has satisfied all of Jacob's conditions. Jacob never received a face-to-face blessing from his father. When Jacob returned to Bethel, the place where the Lord first appeared to him, the Lord "blessed" him (Genesis 35:9). Jacob and Esau reunited only to part ways again. Jacob returns to his father, but it's nothing to get excited about. The Lord has not only received Jacob upon his return to the Promised Land, he has been with him wherever he's gone.

The journey from Bethel to Hebron is little more than an epilogue. Jacob's home is not Hebron but Bethel. More to the point, his home is with the God of Bethel.

The Jacob narrative concludes with the death of Isaac, which echoes the death of Abraham (Genesis 25:7-9). Abraham was buried by his two sons, Isaac and Ishmael. Isaac is buried by his two sons, Esau and Jacob. Perhaps in light of Jacob's deference to Esau in Genesis 33, Esau is mentioned first.

In the final verse of the Jacob narrative, a father and his sons are together again, but only for a moment. The family story closes with a whimper. But the story of what God is doing with this family is just beginning. The Lord has been faithful to his covenant with Abraham and to Jacob. With the birth of Benjamin and the death of Isaac, the way is now clear for Jacob's sons to emerge.

Marred by sorrow

Many people need strength to come home to their family, particularly if it's a family that has been either abusive or stifling. The easy way is to come home and slip into a role we're familiar with playing. We make everyone happy, and we don't risk the exposure, rejection and isolation that often come with upsetting family conventions.

When Jesus came home to Nazareth, the townspeople wanted to throw him off a cliff. Why? It was because he spoke the truth. He was unwilling to conform to expectations. He came as the Messiah, and not *their* version of the Messiah (Luke 4:16-30). When we come home, we're afraid they'll throw us off a cliff if we don't conform to expectations. So instead we throw truth off a cliff. Sadly, the same fears rule many of us when we come home to our spiritual family as well.

Before Jacob met with his father in Hebron, he worshiped God in Bethel. Likewise, meeting with God and worshiping him will give us strength for the journey home—the strength to be ourselves and to speak the truth in love.

Just as it was important to Jacob to return to his father, it is important to many of us to come home to our families. Many people who move here for career reasons do so with the expectation that they will return to be near their families some day. Home, wherever it is, often has a magnetic effect, even if it's been less than nurturing. I've left the Santa Clara Valley, the soil of my youth, three times, but somehow I kept coming back.

Sometimes, the journey home is marred by sorrow, as Jacob's journey was. Allon-bacuth, Bethlehem and Migdal-eder were all places of sadness. Jacob lost his mother, he lost his wife and his son disgraced him. More often than not, the journey home, whether it's across town or across the world, is simply marred by the specter of sorrow. Whatever hope we harbor is muted by concern for what will happen when we arrive.

There may be times when we feel that we need our families in an acute way, but we worry whether they will be there for us. When Jacob returned home after suffering great loss, there wasn't much there.

Glimmers of hope

Even the sorrow that often comes with making the journey home, however, will be transformed. Although Bethlehem and Migdal-eder were places of death and family anguish, they were also places of Messianic hope. Many people first find Jesus, the Messiah, in the despair of such places in their lives. In a place of death, Jesus gives new life. He was, after all, born in Bethlehem, a place of sorrow.

One day Jesus will completely transform places of death and strife into places of life and brotherhood. Although we grieve for all that we have lost at such places, they often give birth to new hope. Benjamin, Son of the Right, not Ben-oni, Son of Sorrow, is born in such places. A new vision of Jesus is born in such places.

Are you now passing through Allon-bacuth, Bethlehem or Migdal-eder? The sadness of those places is not the end of the story. It remains for us to see and appreciate the glimmers of hope that pierce the darkness of family sorrow. God will turn our mourning into dancing. He will wipe away the tears of Allon-bacuth, Bethlehem and Migdal-eder (Revelation 21:4).

Our true home

For many of us it's a letdown when we come home to our families. Let's face it: Every family is a dysfunctional family. Often times, we don't get the embrace from our families that we crave. Whatever embrace we get sometimes feels tentative, insincere or conditional. What we want from our families we can only get from God. And whether we know it or not, we've already got it. The embrace we have received from our heavenly Father is eternal, authentic and unconditional. The Father blesses us because he blesses us. He is the only one who has been with you wherever you've gone.

If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, your true home is Bethel, not Hebron. Bethel means "House of God." It's where God dwells. More to the point, your home is with the God of Bethel. The meaning of Bethel is fulfilled in Jesus. The fullness of God dwells in him (Colossians 2:9). Our home is with our heavenly Father and with his Son, Jesus, who even calls us brothers (Hebrews 2:11). When his earthly family wanted to see him, Jesus looked upon those who were listening to him and said, "Behold, my mother and my brothers" (Mark 3:34).

If our true home is with God, then we can accept our families for what they are instead of demanding that they fulfill all our desires for home.

Our family stories, like the Jacob narrative, may close with a whimper, but the story of what God is doing with his family is just beginning. It will culminate in a family reunion, when the Father finally gathers all his children to himself. Then, when we look into the eyes of Jesus, our Savior, our Lord and our Brother, in the new creation, we will know that we're home.

Scenes of life

In the summer of my 28th year, I lost a job, which afforded me the opportunity to take a trip that I had long dreamed about. I packed up my tent, my sleeping bag and my fly rod and embarked on a six-week trip to Idaho, Montana and Wyoming. I camped, I fished and I prayed.

My plan for one day involved a three-mile cross-country hike to a stream in Yellowstone National Park. The Lord decided to join me. As we walked together, he showed me different scenes from my life. No single person was in more than a scene or two. As I walked toward the stream, I thought, "Not a single person knows where I am right now." And I was struck by this impression: The only one who has been with me in all the scenes is the Lord. No one even knows where I am right now, but the Lord is with me.

I didn't know what I would do at the end of my trip to the Rockies. I didn't know where I would live. But I knew that my home was with the Father, and with his Son, Jesus.

NOTES:

(1) A. Brumley, *Rank Strangers To Me*, © 1987, 1988 CBS Records.

Scripture quotations are taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE (“NASB”). © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995, 1996 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Catalog No. 4880
Genesis 35:16-29
16th Message
Scott Grant
February 13, 2005



series: [The Jacob Narrative](#)
previous message: [Course Correction](#)
formats: [mp3](#)

Copyright © 2005 [Discovery Publishing](#), a ministry of [Peninsula Bible Church](#). This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.