

Genesis 35: Becoming a Spiritual Leader

By
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“Then God said to Jacob, “Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there; and make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from the face of Esau your brother.”
-Genesis 35:1

In the last chapter we talked about how Jacob is now moving into the last part of his life. He is no longer a young man living for himself, but he is the patriarch of a large family with many sons and daughters all entering into adulthood. But, like many of us, Jacob was not prepared to enter into this important phase of life and has failed to move into that role. Although Jacob had gone through the process of becoming a competent young man, who was willing to face his greatest fears and follow the voice of God, in this new role as the leader of his tribe, he hasn't yet found his footing.

As we talked about last time, the things that worked when we were young, tend to fail us as we get older. It reminds me of the classic poem Beowulf. As a young man, Beowulf is the greatest of all warriors and defeats two great threats to the kingdom, the monster Grendel and Grendel's mother. However, as Beowulf ages he becomes king and faces a third monster, a dragon, and falls in combat leaving his people without a king. After his death some of his companions remark:

“Alas, Beowulf ere he went had not more carefully considered the old possessor's will that cursed the gold. 'Oft must it be that many men through one man's will shall suffer woe, even as is now befallen us. We could not advise our king beloved, the shepherd of this realm, to any well-counselled course, that he should not approach the keeper of the gold, but should let him lie where long time he had been, abiding in his dwellings unto the world's end, pursuing his mighty fate.”

-Beowulf

As a young warrior, Beowulf excelled above any of his fellow companions, but now as the old king, he approached the threat like he was a young man and failed. This moment will come for all of us if we live long enough to face it. As we get older we must learn to step into the role of the wise leader, and if we haven't acquired the wisdom necessary to lead others, we will find ourselves failing as Jacob unfortunately did.

He has already created division in his house through his polygamy and favoritism, he failed to properly protect his daughter, which led to her being raped, he hasn't done a good job raising his sons which is why they are impulsively violent men, and he failed to fight for true justice for his daughter's abuse. However, what is admirable about many of the patriarchs of the book of Genesis, is that they tend to learn from their mistakes quickly and attempt to fix them as best as they can. So in this chapter, we get to see Jacob repent from his error and seek to lead his family. And we can see this transition occur in three different parts, he leads his family into purity, he brings them to the place of his calling, and he endures the loss of three of the most important people in his life.

Leading in Purity

“And Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, “Put away the foreign gods that are among you, purify yourselves, and change your garments. “Then 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 in the way which I have gone.” So they gave Jacob all the foreign gods which were in their hands, and the earrings which were in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the terebinth tree which was by Shechem.”

-Genesis 35:2-4

The way that Jacob articulates himself in this passage would insinuate that while he did not personally worship foreign gods, he was well aware that his family did. This idolatry had begun long before Jacob had children, for we learn in Genesis 31 that Laban had “household idols” that he most certainly worshipped, that Rachel stole and brought with her into the promised land. From there, it seems as though Jacob's family has accumulated many different “foreign gods” that Jacob now has to call his family to “put away.” This is an important point. We have seen throughout Jacob's life that one of the main sins that he struggles with seems to be timidity.

He begins his journey at the age of 40, still living with his parents, and being led around by his mother in a scheme against his father. From there we see him get taken advantage of multiple times by his uncle Laban. And only through the direct calling of God does Jacob finally confront both his brother and his uncle. Even in the last chapter we see Jacob really struggle to confront the father of the boy who raped his daughter, or his own sons for killing that tribe in revenge.

So it makes sense that while Jacob seems to have fulfilled his word in Genesis 28 when he vowed:

“If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going, and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on, “so that I come back to my father’s house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God.”

Genesis 28:20-21

But, now that he is the leader of his home, though he had been faithful in following God personally, he had failed to lead his wife or his children in the same devotion and he is finally seeing his mistake. He had allowed the idolatrous worship to permeate his home, and now his family has adopted the morality and the ideals of the neighboring tribes. This is something that we tend to pass over when we talk about idols in the modern day. Idols weren’t just objects of worship (though they were that too) they were also images that represented a particular religious ideal.

Beholding and Becoming

When an ancient person bowed before their household idols and sacrificed on the altars that they constructed for them, this was not just a religious action, it was an embodied ideal that permeated their entire life, shaping their thoughts, their goals, and their imaginations. So when a Jew or a Christian says that the ancient pagan gods are “false” we are not just saying that these gods aren’t the one true God to be worshiped, we are also saying that the ideology that they represent is also false. As an example of this, take a look at the below image as well as the symbolic interpretation by the author Joseph Campbell:



“Śiva, Lord of the Cosmic Dance (cast bronze, India, c. tenth–twelfth century a.d.) The symbolism of this eloquent image has been well expounded by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy,[43] and by Heinrich Zimmer.[44] Briefly: the extended right hand holds the drum, the beat of which is the beat of time, time being the first principle of creation; the extended left holds the flame, which is the flame of the destruction of the created world; the second right hand is held in the gesture of “fear not,” while the second left, pointing to the lifted left foot, is held in a position symbolizing “elephant” (the elephant is the “breaker of the way through the jungle of the world,” i.e., the divine guide); the right foot is planted on the back of a dwarf, the demon “Non-knowing,” which signifies the passage of souls from God into matter, but the left is lifted, showing the release of the soul: the left is the foot to which the “elephant-hand” is pointing and supplies the reason for the assurance, “Fear not.” The God’s head is balanced, serene and still, in the midst of the dynamism of creation and destruction which is symbolized by the rocking arms

and the rhythm of the slowly stamping right heel. This means that at the center all is still. Śiva's right earring is a man's, his left, woman's; for the God includes and is beyond the pairs of opposites. Śiva's facial expression is neither sorrowful nor joyous, but is the visage of the Unmoved Mover, beyond, yet present within, the world's bliss and pain."

-Joseph Campbell - "The Hero with a Thousand Faces"

For the purposes of this paper it isn't important to understand all the symbolism described above. Only to understand that these images were not mere decoration, they were symbolic sermons of ideology that were gazed upon, reflected upon, and sacrificed to. The effect upon the conscience of the individual was profound as their entire life orientation was shaped by this particular image. The reality of this idea is something that the Bible also understands:

"But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord."

-2 Corinthians 3:18

What we "behold" dictates what we become. For the Christian, we are supposed to "behold" the glory of God, and the result of beholding His great beauty is supposed to transform us. But the reverse is also true, if we behold images that are antithetical to our faith, these images are also conforming us to their image.

"And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God."

-Romans 12:2

So, though we live in an increasingly secular age, it isn't that we don't have modern "gods", it's simply that our worship of these "gods" is not as ritualized as it was in the past. While a modern person probably doesn't have some sort of a golden image in their living room that they offer sacrifices to, they do have an "image" of an ideal life that they are willing to make sacrifices in order to obtain. Each person has an ideal of what "success" or "love" looks like. They shape these ideals off of images that they get from their cultural surroundings, whether they be the ideals of an influencer that they listen to or the ideals of the culture that are given to them by the arts that they consume.

Principalities and Powers

"For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places."

-Ephesians 6:12

This is increasingly hard for us to understand in the modern age, but in the ancient world there was a well accepted belief that the material world was a reflection of the “celestial” or heavenly order. This meant that just as we have rulers and authorities in our nations, there is a similar order in the cosmos that could actually be viewed and “understood” in the stars (this is why astrology was so important to ancient cultures). However, unlike our earthly order that has physical representations, the heavenly order was spiritual and had no physical form.

So when Paul speaks about principalities, powers, and spiritual hosts of wickedness in heavenly places, this is what he is speaking about. These entities lack bodies and so they rule over man first in the imagination of man through “ideas” and then they are “embodied” in these images and belief systems. The French philosopher Rene Girard comments on these ambiguous terms used by the New Testament writers to explain this phenomenon like this:

“It is striking how many names the New Testament writers invent to designate these ambiguous entities. They may be called powers “of this world,” then on the other hand “celestial powers,” as well as “sovereignities,” “thrones,” “dominions,” “princes of the kingdom of the air,” “elements of the world,” “archons,” “kings,” “princes of this world,” etc. Why such a vast vocabulary, made up apparently of such dissimilar elements? When we examine these titles, we quickly confirm that they divide into two groups. Expressions like “powers of this world,” “kings of the earth,” “principalities,” etc. assert the earthly character of the powers, their concrete reality here below in our world. On the other hand, expressions like “princes of the kingdom of the air,” “celestial powers,” etc. emphasize the extraterrestrial, “spiritual” nature of these entities. We are talking about the same entities in both instances. The powers called “celestial” are not different at all from powers “of this world.”

-René Girard - “I See Satan Fall Like Lightning”

So while these terms might sound strange to us, it is the best way that the Biblical authors could explain how Satan actually fulfills his boast to Christ:

“Then the devil, taking Him up on a high mountain, showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. And the devil said to Him, “All this authority I will give You, and their glory; for this has been delivered to me, and I give it to whomever I wish.”

-Luke 4:5-6

Though Satan and his demons lack physical bodies, they exercise authority over the kingdoms of the earth through these “embodied” belief systems, these principalities and powers. These belief systems then contain a “priest” class who administers the beliefs

and rituals that are intended to “serve” these “powers”. All of these things represent the “body” of this dark spiritual power, or as we commonly call them now “demon”. This is what C.S. Lewis says about this particular class of “angel” in his book “The Discarded Image”:

“In the third and lowest Hierarchy we at last find creatures who are concerned with Man. It contains Princedoms (or Principalities, or Princes); Archangels; and Angels. The word angel is thus both a generic name for all the nine species contained in the three Hierarchies, and also a specific name for the lowest—as sailor in English sometimes includes all seafaring persons and is sometimes confined only to those who berth forward. Princedoms are the guardians and patrons of nations, so that Theology names Michael the Prince of the Jews (ix). The scriptural source of this is Dan. xii.”

-C. S. Lewis - “The Discarded Image”

These entities would rule over nations through their ideals, and, in the ancient world, form “bodies” through their religious structures and idols. As such, we as the church can make two equal and opposite mistakes. We can on one hand focus only on the physical manifestation of these “entities” by calling out “the culture” or particular politicians and celebrities, not fully understanding that there is an actual “principality” behind these manifestations. While on the other hand, we can become so spiritual that we think that fighting these “entities” happens through pure supernatural efforts such as prayer and deliverance ministries. If we want to stand against these powers, we have to give the Devil his due and first understand what they are. They are spiritual entities that form “bodies” of authority upon the earth.

While in the modern world we have given up this more ritualistic form of worship, this does not mean that these “principalities” have given up their influence upon us. These ideas that we value have a “face” they have an “image” that represents this ideal and it is this image that we gaze upon and orient our lives toward. While they don’t take the form of ancient statues, they still have their symbols and their “priests” that administer their ideas. Why do you think we call celebrities “stars”, or “idols”? While modern man doesn’t think that the literal stars manifest these “principalities and powers”, or bow down before idols made of wood or stone, but we still do orient our lives in accordance with the “stars” and we still do gaze upon “idols”.

These “images” in the shape of “moving pictures” (or “movies”), online influencers, political figures, and celebrity culture that shape our consciences, our hopes, and our dreams. So a modern person who is pursuing their ideals in love, friendship, career and so on, through personal sacrifice and investment, may not see their behavior as serving (which is another word for worship) the image of their ideal, but this is exactly what they

are doing. This all might sound rather scary, partially because it is, we must remember that there are good angels in this world as well that we will talk more about later, but for now I think it is important for the modern person to wrestle with this reality. When a parent is protecting our children, it isn't just physical dangers that we are protecting them from, but spiritual.

We must be aware of the modern "principalities", the modern ideals of being that are being produced and "embodied" in our culture. We have to be aware of the various ideals within our own culture, and meditate on how much influence these ideals have upon us and how we are absorbing these ideals through the "images" that we gaze upon. There are more obvious versions of this in things like pornography, which is why this practice is so appealing to us and hard to fight. But there are more subtle versions that we have talked about, like influencers and celebrities, and finally in modern innovations like AI.

"He was granted power to give breath to the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak and cause as many as would not worship the image of the beast to be killed."

-Revelation 13:15

I unfortunately don't have time to go into this concept here, but we can see in the Scripture that Satan longs to replicate the power of God, and this includes the power of God to be incarnated upon the earth in the form of Jesus Christ. While these ancient religions gave demons a form of "incarnation", they are not fully realized. Demons get closer when they inhabit or "possess" individuals, but Satan would like a body of his own, not a dormant statue, but a true body that could move and "speak". While modern AI is not a perfect representation of this idea, our technology is getting closer and closer to this ideal. So while I don't want to fear monger or craft conspiracy theories, I do think that we should be on guard as the church for how "principalities" might exercise influence in our modern world.

And as tough as this is for an individual to learn, we are ultimately called to lead others in this same calling. For while he failed to lead his family in this way, he had not failed to lead himself in this calling. So many parents do so well at protecting their children from physical dangers, but they don't really think through what it means to protect their children from these spiritual dangers. And it is not sufficient to merely pray over our children and take them to church, though these things are good, the actual process of protection takes more intentionality.

This is one thing that we have to give serious credit to Jacob for. Jacob has, though not perfectly, succeeded broadly in removing idols from his own life and ultimately heeding the voice of God. So before we even talk about how we might better lead our families in this calling, it must be said that the best leader is able to point to their own example. If we want to lead other people well, we must start with ourselves. Only through our own devotion to serve God in our lives, can we adequately lead those who are following us into purity.

So many parents do so well at protecting their children from physical dangers, but they don't really think through what it means to protect their children from these spiritual dangers. And it is not sufficient to merely pray over our children and take them to church, though these things are good, the actual process of protection takes more intentionality. When it comes to leading others into this ideal, I would say that, like almost every other ideal in Christianity, the true ideal lies in the center of two dangerous excesses. On the one hand, if we overprotect our children and insulate them from ideals that go outside of our faith, once they are exposed to alternative thoughts, they are wholly unprepared to deal with them and tend to go off the rails. On the other hand, if we allow our children to be exposed to all ideals without any protection, they won't have a solid enough foundation of belief to be able to protect themselves from wrong and destructive influences.

This balance is rather tricky and hard to achieve in all instances, but I think that Jacob's response in the beginning of this chapter can at least show us where the line of protection is:

“And Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, “Put away the foreign gods that are among you, purify yourselves, and change your garments.”

-Genesis 35:2

This idea of “cleansing” your house to prepare for the works of God is something that we see played out throughout Scripture. It is this concept that is expressed in the ritual that Jews still practice to this day before the feast of Passover when they remove all leaven from their homes, but it was also literally practiced by leaders like Gideon in Judges 6, King Hezekiah in 2 Chronicles 29, and finally fulfilled in Christ when He cleanses the temple of money changers in Luke 19. All these actions symbolize the same thing, a strong leader casting out the images of idolatry that have ensnared those around them. Quickly I want to point out how interesting it is that Christ never smashes a literal idol when He performs this act, instead He chases out those who were using the temple to take financial advantage of those who came to worship God. This seems to fulfill His statement in Matthew 6:24

“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.”

While there didn't seem to be any literal idols set up to the god Mammon in the temple courts, "his" ideals had certainly influenced the leaders of Israel and allowed them to use worship as a means of gaining money and influence. That being said, how can a parent perform this act for our children?

While there is much I can say about good ways to properly protect our children from negative influences, this is at least fairly helpful, while we can't control all influences (neither should we) we can control the environment of our own household. To use a couple simple examples, while I can't actually stop my child from drinking, I can make sure that drinking doesn't happen in my house, and even if my child disobeys my rule outside of my home, I can always discipline them in my home. While I might not be able to stop my child from seeing pornography, I can certainly take steps to make sure it doesn't happen in my household.

So when Jacob buries the idols of his family and commands them to change their clothes and purify themselves, this doesn't guarantee that they have actually left this sinful ideologies, (we will see evidence to the contrary in the near future), and this also doesn't mean that they didn't just go out and get new idols, but it does mean that Jacob is leading his family in the realm of his authority, his own house, and made it clear to them how he views this particular practice. More than this, the idea of changing their clothes, though it has some really interesting symbolic content, one way to understand this act in this story is that Jacob's family had totally embraced the surrounding culture. This is why he has to bury their jewelry. It isn't that God is against jewelry, but everything that they were wearing symbolized the pagan, idolatrous culture that Jacob had allowed to infiltrate his house, and now is telling them to leave behind.

So, while it would be unwise for a parent to fully control all the clothing that their kids wear, there is a level of control that we do have over this clothing, understanding that the things that we embody do have an effect. The clothing that we wear, and the language that we use say a lot about what social circle we are trying to fit into. So again, while this topic is too broad and complex for me to even attempt to give an exhaustive answer to what we should or shouldn't do in parenting our kids in this interesting culture, but what I will say is that our strategy has to be flexible to both incorporate the individual nature of our children as well as the age that we are dealing with:

“And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”

-Romans 12:2

This world does have a pattern that pulls on us to conform us to its image, but not everyone is pulled in the same way. Some children will follow the ideals of the gospel when it comes to finances with ease, but will struggle mightily when it comes to their sexuality. Other kids will find it relatively simple to follow the sexual ideals of the Bible, but will struggle heavily with alcohol. As parents we need to be sensitive to these individual aspects of our kids and respond accordingly. But also, as kids we are supposed to have heavy control over what our kids are exposed to, as they get older, that control lessens and we have to be flexible to that difference. But this is why having a strong community of believers around you is so important. None of us can see all the nuances of reality, but if we are surrounded by many other people going through similar issues, we can learn from each other and hopefully grow in our wisdom.

Returning Home

“And they journeyed, and the terror of God was upon the cities that were all 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. And he built an altar there and called the place El Bethel, because there God appeared to him when he fled from the face of his brother. Now Deborah, Rebekah’s nurse, died, and she was buried below Bethel under the terebinth tree. So the name of it was called Allon Bachuth. Then God appeared to Jacob again, when he came from Padan Aram, and blessed him. And God said to him, “Your name is Jacob; your name shall not be called Jacob anymore, but Israel shall be your name.” So He called his name Israel. Also God said to him: “I am God Almighty. Be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall proceed from you, and kings shall come from your body. be fruitful and multiply. “The land which I gave Abraham and Isaac I give to you; and to your descendants after you I give this land.” Then God went up from him in the place where He talked with him. So Jacob set up a pillar in the place where He talked with him, a pillar of stone; and he poured a drink offering on it, and he poured oil on it. And Jacob called the name of the place where God spoke with him, Bethel. Jacob leads his children to the place where God first called him.”

Genesis 35:5-15

Just as the demonic “principalities” exercise authority upon this earth through human institutions and “priests”, so the faithful angels of God that guide people to the Father do the same. When Jacob heeds the calling of God and returns to the place of his original

calling, he brings his family with him to observe his own worship of the one true God. He is choosing to act as the “body” of the very angels that he saw ascending to the presence of God in Genesis 28.

This is again, a very strange concept for modern man, but we can see this mystery described throughout the Bible, but I think this concept is laid out most clearly in the book of Revelation. In the first chapter of this book, the apostle John is shown an image of Christ holding stars in His hand and walking amongst lampstands. Later in the same chapter John is told:

“The mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands which you saw are the seven churches.”

-Revelation 1:20

We are told that there are angels, or Godly “principalities” that preside over churches. Notice that these angels are plural and have authority over individual churches. These messengers (which is what the word “angel” means) of God have “bodies” that are oriented towards the worship and praise of God Himself. Like the demons of pagan idolatry, God’s angels exercise authority in much the same way, and towards a similar effect. The obvious main difference is that they are not receiving the worship that they are instituting, but instead they are “carrying” our worship up the “ladder” to the praise and glory of God alone. And they are not carrying down their own ideals, but instead they are carrying to men the ideals of God Himself.

This is why, in the Bible, both prophets and apostles are sometimes described with this term (though our English translations don’t always show this reality). It is because, just as the priests and kings of the pagan nations are the earthly representations of the demonic principality, so the leaders bound to Christ’s authority are the representations of the angelic authorities who are calling and guiding them. This is what Jacob is currently doing for his own family.

He is no longer simply telling them about his faith, he is now showing them his faith by bringing them to the place of his original encounter with God and demonstrating for them an act of supreme worship to God. Not only is he doing this, but he does this confidently in the midst of two powerful challenges. The first is that the surrounding tribes had heard of Simeon and Levi’s violent acts in the previous chapter and were wanting to seek vengeance upon Jacob’s clan. We are told explicitly in this section of Scripture that:

“And they journeyed, and the terror of God was upon the cities that were all around them, and they did not pursue the sons of Jacob.”

-Genesis 35:5

The surrounding tribes wanted to pursue Jacob's family, but God supernaturally protected them. We also know from reading the rest of the chapter that Rachel was pregnant and was having a troubling pregnancy that eventually led to her death. This is seemingly the reason why God, in the midst of repeating His promises to Jacob says this:

“Be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall proceed from you, and kings shall come from your body.”

We will see later that Jacob took this as a promise about Benjamin who was in the belly of Rachel. But, it was in this moment, facing these two intense trials, that Jacob demonstrates his faithfulness to God by heeding the call of the Lord. This is so important. Because as vital as it is for a parent to learn to protect our children from the influences of this world, it is far more important for us to show our children what it means to walk after God. To be the spiritual leader of the home does not merely mean that we pray for our families and teach them about the Bible, though we need to do this as well, it means that we *show* our children what it means to worship our God.

This is one of the reasons why, at our church, we don't dismiss the children's ministry until after worship, and why we have family service once a month. As important as it is for our children to receive good teaching about God's word, it is even more important that children get to see their parents worshiping God. And while this worship is especially embodied in our worship service, this is something that should extend to our everyday lives. We know from Scripture, that it is during times of prosperity and adversity that men turn away from God and begin to serve other things. In our prosperity we forget our need for God and turn to idols, and during intense trial we seek immediate solutions to our problems in the philosophy and wonders of our world.

If we want our families to come after God, we must be faithful in our own walks with Him. And as important as this is when they are young, it is far more important when they are teenagers. For me, I fell away from my faith when I was a teenager, due to no fault of my parents, but I can confidently say that it was the genuine faith of my parents that actually led me back to the Lord. Both of my parents had a sincere faith towards God, they really believed in Him and showed that in both good times and bad times. No matter what was going on in our lives, both adversity and prosperity, my parents always served God in ritualized ways like going to church and tithing, but also in their everyday

conduct and attitudes. It was this authenticity that called me back to the Lord after I lost my way.

There is no more important thing than we can possibly do for our children than authentically worship the Lord in our marriages, our careers, and throughout our lives. This is the “image” that we hope they take away from our time with them and the image that will hopefully lead them home when they get lost. But on the flip side, nothing drives children away quicker than hypocritical faith. When children only hear from their parents what faith in God is all about, but they never see it in action, it actually creates revulsion in them when it comes to their faith. It is this hypocritical attitude that we are seemingly warned about in the second commandment:

“Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.”

-Exodus 20:7

We have unfortunately reduced this commandment to mean merely using God’s name as a curse word. Though I think that cussing with God’s name does violate this command, I don’t believe that it exhausts this command. Really what this command is about is carrying the name of the Lord in a vain, or useless way. This could mean simply claiming the “name” of God, (calling ourselves Christians) while living in a vain way, apart from God. Or more seriously, committing sin in the name of God. For instance, beating our children and manipulating Scripture to “justify” our behavior.

While the latter sin is clearly and obviously more severe than the former, they are both serious violations of this commandment. If we carry the name of the Lord as a part of our own identity, we should do this seriously. While we won’t be perfect, it should be clear to our children who we serve, this is the best and greatest thing that we can do for them.

Finally, when Jacob brought his family to Bethlehem, whether they heard the voice of God there or not, Jacob was able to share with his family his story of meeting God. It is very easy for us to be so ashamed of what God brought us out of that we never talk about it. It is part of our attempt to insulate our children from past wrongs. But, Jacob not only takes his family to Bethel, but he does so in the context of when he first went there:

“Then God said to Jacob, “Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there; and make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from the face of Esau your brother.”

-Genesis 35:1

As part of Jacob's return to Bethel, he has to remember that the reason why he went to Bethel in the first place was to flee from the consequences of a severe sin. When we turned to the Lord, it is important to remember that we were turning from something else. And if we want our children to understand what it means to follow after God, they don't need for us to act as though we have always been perfect, we have to share with them our mistakes and our repentance. This is what trains them to be able to repent from their own mistakes and follow after God, not perfectly, but persistently.

Leading Through Grief and Loss

"Now it came to pass, when she was in hard labor, that the midwife said to her, "Do not fear; you will have this son also." And so it was, as her soul was departing (for she died), that she called his name Ben-Oni; but his father called him Benjamin. So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem). And Jacob set a pillar on her grave, which is the pillar of Rachel's grave to this day."

-Genesis 35:17-20

Unfortunately, after this amazing moment of transcendence, Jacob experiences extreme loss in his personal life. First, we are told that his mother's handmaid Deborah died. This, by the way, is probably not mentioned because Jacob was particularly close to this woman, but instead, we must remember that Rebekah's death is never mentioned in the Bible. This is odd since she was such an important woman, and even her maid's death is recorded for us. The reason for this seems to be that Rebekah more than likely died before Jacob came back home, and the death of her handmaid was Jacob's last real connection to his mother. After this, the love of his life Rachel dies in childbirth, then immediately after this, Jacob's father Isaac dies as well.

What we are witnessing in Jacob's life brings to mind the metaphor that we discussed last time of life being like the normal course of the sun. When life begins we are like the rising sun. We are growing in our strength and our ability. We are meeting new people and experiencing for the first time all the wonderful things that life has to offer. We are being raised by our parents, we are falling in love, growing into our identity and our strength, filling out our lives as the rays of the sun fill the sky when it reaches its peak.

But as the rising of the sun and the setting of the sun look so similar, so life's dawn and dusk are reflections of one another. As our time on the earth begins to "set" we are slowly losing strength and ability. We aren't experiencing things for the first time, but we are preparing to experience them for the last time. We aren't meeting the people that we will spend our lives with, we are saying goodbye to those who have made this life so memorable.

I think the book that captured this juxtaposition really well is “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button” by F. Scott Fitzgerald. Though I can’t recommend the movie (mostly because I can’t really remember it) this short story is well worth the read. The beginning is fairly comedic in that Benjamin is born as a full grown old man, complete with a cane and a beard. But he ages in reverse and ends his life as a little baby. By doing this, Fitzgerald can cleverly show the many similarities between growing up and growing old, sometimes in a comedic way, but sometimes in a tragic way. Take the last part of the book as Benjamin nears his death, though he now appears as a baby:

“The past – the wild charge at the head of his men up San Juan Hill; the first years of his marriage when he worked late into the summer dusk down in the busy city for young Hildegard whom he loved; the days before that when he sat smoking far into the night in the gloomy old Button house on Monroe Street with his grandfather—all these had faded like unsubstantial dreams from his mind as though they had never been. He did not remember. He did not remember clearly whether the milk was warm or cool at his last feeding or how the days passed – there was only his crib and Nana’s familiar presence. And then he remembered nothing. When he was hungry he cried – that was all. Through the noons and nights he breathed and over him there were soft mummings and murmurings that he scarcely heard, and faintly differentiated smells, and light and darkness. Then it was all dark, and his white crib and the dim faces that moved above him, and the warm sweet aroma of the milk, faded out altogether from his mind.”

-F. Scott Fitzgerald - “The Curious Case Of Benjamin Button”

By showing death like this, Fitzgerald gets us to notice the tragic similarities between a baby becoming truly conscious for the first time and forming memories, and an older person losing consciousness as they mentally decline and lose touch with their memories. While this reality is tragic, it is also an inescapable truth. Even Jesus, after His resurrection shares this reality with the apostle Peter:

“Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish.” This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, “Follow Me.”

-John 21:18-19

Even though this passage is specifically about Peter’s eventual martyrdom on a cross, the parallel is clear. When we are young, we need others to “gird” us and “carry” us where we did not wish, and when we are old, the same thing happens to us. And if we

face this time of our life poorly, we will long for our youth with jealousy and put our negative outlook upon our own children.

Although we can have much grace for Rachel considering the immense pain she was enduring in her childbirth, when she named her child Ben-oni (which means “son of my sorrow”) as she died, she was cursing her son to bear a name that would be constant reminder of how his entrance into this world cost his mother her life. Instead of seeing his life as a precious gift, he might see his life as a tragic curse. Though this is an extreme example, how easy is it for us to, in some ways, be jealous of our children’s youth? They are young and full of potential, and we are growing older and we may bear in our hearts regret, some of which is aimed at our children. We can meditate on how much of our youth we have had to sacrifice to raise and support them.

A less tragic version of this is simply living in regret for our lost youth. There’s a really interesting movie series that me and my family like called “Jumanji” where there is a magical game called “Jumanji” that literally pulls the characters into itself where they have to fight to survive the various perils that the game throws at them. At bottom, this movie symbolizes the temptation to use games in order to disconnect from our average life. As such, the game presents itself as “a way for those who wish to find a way to leave the world behind.” So in the movie, we are introduced to young characters who, for various reasons, are discontent in their given lives, and are also in the throes of adolescence, learning to become adults. The game then allows them to become “adults”, in one form or another, but also has them confront true dangers.

As interesting as this point is, the most recent addition to this franchise approaches this same phenomenon in old age. In this movie, it isn’t just the young who are brought into the game, but a grandparent who is bitter over his lost youth and discontent with growing older. And he expresses this by saying “Getting old sucks, don’t let anyone tell you different.” This is showing the other side of the equation. While the young seek to be adults, the old seek to recapture their youth. And the catharsis, or emotional resolution of the film, shows both the young and the old accept their place in life with the grandpa saying “Getting old is a gift.” Instead of regretting what he had lost, he learned to appreciate what he had.

This is common in parenting. At the same time that children are ready to experience the next phase of life, parents are mourning their lost youth and try to recapture it with some sort of “mid-life crisis”. This not only disables the adult from aging gracefully and learn how to appreciate the time they have been given, but it also disables the adult from helping their child walk through this phase of life.

“So teach us to number our days, That we may gain a heart of wisdom.”

-Psalm 90:12

This is what Jacob is doing when he changes his son’s name to “Benjamin” (which most probably means “son of my right hand”). It would be easy for Jacob to maintain his given name, since his birth caused the death of the person he loved most. But instead Jacob changes his son’s name, not to reflect the tragedy of his birth, but the potential of his life. To endure loss well, to accept the tragedies of life, not with joy, but contentment and thanksgiving, is a lesson that is priceless to grant to our children. If we can show them this, then they will be able to approach the transitions of their own lives with courage and stability. But if we don’t learn this lesson, if we become bitter, resentful, and discontent with the losses of our old age, then we have broken their hope for the future and taught them to be happy only when their circumstances call for it. It is this vital lesson that Jesus tries to teach His followers most famous sermon:

“Blessed are those who mourn, For they shall be comforted.”

-Matthew 5:4

I’m sure that the followers of Christ would have preferred to hear Him say that those who followed Him would not suffer loss, but this isn’t the case. Everyone will suffer loss, but to those who have the courage to mourn, they will have the grace of divine comfort. And within that comfort, they can learn acceptance and gratitude. Though Jacob is far from perfect at this point in his life, and his family is far from healed from the bad decisions that Jacob has made thus far, he is learning how to lead his family well, and for that he deserves our praise and respect.

“The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears, And delivers them out of all their troubles. The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, And saves such as have a contrite spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, But the LORD delivers him out of them all. He guards all his bones; Not one of them is broken. Evil shall slay the wicked, And those who hate the righteous shall be condemned. The LORD redeems the soul of His servants, And none of those who trust in Him shall be condemned.”

-Psalm 34:17-22