

God's Faithfulness is played out in Lifetimes

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- [0 : 0 0] We're reading the whole chapter. Genesis 35. I will build an altar to God who answered me in the day of my distress and who has been with me wherever I have gone.
- So they gave Jacob all the foreign gods they had and the rings in their ears and Jacob buried them under the oak at Shechem. Then they set out and the terror of God fell on the towns all around them so that no one pursued them.
- Jacob and all the people with him came to Luz, that is Bethel, in the land of Canaan. There he built an altar and he called the place El Bethel because it was there that God revealed himself to him when he was fleeing from his brother.
- Now Deborah, Rebecca's nurse, died and was buried under the oak outside Bethel. So it was named Alon Bacuth. After Jacob returned from Padam Aram, God appeared to him again and blessed him.
- God said to him, Your name is Jacob, but you will no longer be called Jacob. Your name will be Israel. So he named him Israel. And God said to him, I am God Almighty.
- [1 : 3 6] Be fruitful and increase in number. A nation and a community of nations will come from you and kings will be among your descendants. The land I gave to Abraham and Isaac I also give to you and I will give this land to your descendants after you.
- Then God went up from him at the place where he had talked with him. Jacob set up a stone pillar at the place where God had talked with him and he poured out a drink offering on it.
- He also poured oil on it. Jacob called the place where God had talked with him Bethel. Then they moved on from Bethel. While they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel began to give birth and had great difficulty.
- And as she was having great difficulty in childbirth, the midwife said to her, Don't despair, for you have another son. As she breathed her last, for she was dying, she named her son Ben-Oni, but his father named him Benjamin.
- So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath, that is Bethlehem. Over her tomb, Jacob set up a pillar. And to this day, that pillar marks Rachel's tomb.
- [2 : 4 6] Israel moved on again and pitched his tent beyond Migdal-Eder. While Israel was living in that region, Reuben went in and slept with his father's concubine, Bilhah, and Israel heard of it.
- Jacob had ten sons. The sons of Leah, Reuben, the firstborn of Jacob, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun. The sons of Rachel, Joseph and Benjamin.
- The sons of Rachel's servant, Bilhah, Dan and Naphtali. The sons of Leah's servant, Zilpah, Gad, and Asher. These were the sons of Jacob, who were born to him in Paddan Aram.
- Jacob came home to his father Isaac in Mamre, near Kiriath Arba, that is Hebron, where Abraham and Isaac had stayed. Isaac lived a hundred and eighty years.

Then he breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people, old and full of years. And his sons Esau and Jacob buried him. This is the word of the Lord. Okay, good evening.

[3 : 57] Well, thank you to Aileen for reading, and thank you to James for leading. Let me just pray as we start. Father God, thank you for the promises that you make to your people.

Help us as we come to your word to hear you speak, and give us hearts ready to respond. Amen. I wonder when the last time was that you really enjoyed an ending.

When was the last time you read a book where you were just really, really excited to get to the last chapter? Or watched a TV show that hooked you so much that you just couldn't wait for the last episode to come out?

I know that some of you are waiting with bated breath for the next series of Line of Duty to actually happen. Goodness me, what's happening? What will come next in that series? Who knows? I still remember when I was a kid waiting for the Harry Potter books to come out, being one of the biggest experiences of my life as like a 10-year-old.

Thinking, I just, I can't wait for this to happen. My entire life was like it's just waiting for this moment. And isn't it brilliant when actually that pays off? When you find the last chapter of something does a good job of tying everything together.

[5 : 05] When you see just how far the characters have come. And when you finally get the details that make sense of the story. Maybe even a few hints of what's coming next in the sequel. Which you really do want to come as soon as possible.

Well, tonight we're going to look at what is essentially the last episode in the Jacob storyline of the Genesis saga. Something that reads more like an episode or series of EastEnders than a historical documentary.

Genesis 35 is the last chapter. And a story covering 20 years of Jacob's life over seven chapters of Genesis. It's a chapter that ties together all of Jacob's life.

And points ahead to what might be coming next. Now Jacob might be the main character of all this story. But it's actually not been about him. The whole story has been showing us the faithfulness of Jacob's God.

And teaching the people of Israel who would one day read this story. About their God's faithfulness to their ancestors. And the strength of his promises. So as we look at this chapter focused on God's faithfulness.

[6 : 07] We'll see what it means to live for him not just today. But way on into our lives. What will it look like to be faithful not just in the next week. But in the next five years, ten years and fifty years.

Because as it turns out God's promises are not just for now. They're for our whole lifetimes. And so our big thought for the evening is this. God's faithfulness is played out in lifetimes. Because he keeps his promises to his people forever.

So if you're taking notes, that's the two parts of our big thought tonight. God's faithfulness is played out in lifetimes. Because he keeps his promises to his people forever. Now if we're going to understand this last episode.

Then we need to look back. So let's have a bit of a series recap. Here's previously on the life of Jacob. Even before Jacob is born. He and his brother Esau are fighting in the womb.

Jacob is born second. And he is called Jacob which means deceiver. A name that's going to become very fitting over the course of his life. When he grows up, he tricks his brother out of an inheritance.

[7 : 10] And not only that, he also deceives his father into blessing him instead of his brother. Esau is so angry because of this, because of what Jacob has done. That he seeks to kill his own brother.

So Jacob has to flee for his life. Jacob travels to save some relatives far away. But on the way when he's fleeing, he's confronted by God. At a place that he then calls Bethel.

Or the house of God. Back in chapter 28, God reveals himself to Jacob. And tells him his covenant promises that were made to his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac.

Well, they are still in force for Jacob. Now after that account, Jacob's fairly afraid. But he makes a vow to God in Genesis 28 verse 20 saying this.

If God will be with me and watch over me on this journey I am taking. And will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's household. Then the Lord will be my God.

[8 : 07] And this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house. Now notice, back in chapter 28, he's actually testing God's covenant. The promises are made. And he goes, okay, well if you keep up your half of the covenant, then do you know what?

I will come back here and worship you one day. Jacob then is still fleeing from Esau. He goes to stay with his uncle Laban and then things just go terribly wrong. Laban's about as tricky and deceitful as Jacob is.

He's met his match. And so Jacob ends up spending 20 years working as a hired laborer for his uncle. In that time he does keep fairly busy. He marries Laban's two daughters and father's 11 children between them and their two maidservants.

And eventually he decides that he's had enough of Laban and sneaks away, taking his whole family and household with him. But then Laban realizes, chases him down and catches up.

And just when it looks like everything's going to go wrong, well God intervenes. And the two men depart from each other in peace. From there, Jacob decides to take his family back to the land of his father Isaac.

[9 : 11] And so he makes the long journey home. On the way he ends up in a wrestling match with the angel of the Lord, which he loses. But not before God has given him a new name. In chapter 32, God says this, Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel.

Because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome. He's gone from being Jacob the deceiver to Israel, which means struggles with God.

His deceptiveness and tricks have cost him a lot. But God is still with him. And he's now a changed man. Proof that that really is a big change is when he finally meets Esau, his previously vengeful brother.

They actually reconcile and depart from each other on good terms. Which is a minor miracle, given how this story started in chapter 28. Now in chapter 34, he would have seen that Jacob and his family still live in a very dangerous place.

And that his sons are growing up to be as bad, if not worse, than their father. And it's a hint of what's coming up in the story of Jacob's sons in the last 15 chapters of Genesis. So a lot's happened in Jacob's life.

[10 : 18] But throughout every single step, the Lord has been faithful. And in Genesis 35, we find ourselves back at Bethel, the house of God. This goes back to the site where Jacob first met with God when he was fleeing from Esau 20 years ago.

I noticed that this passage we read today talks about that fleeing twice. I think it just wants us to connect this time that Jacob meets God and the last time. Well, why would it do that?

Well, I think it wants us to see the change in this man. And you can see on the screen just how many things have changed in Jacob's life. This final episode is a return of a changed man drawing a line onto the last part of his life.

It's significant that having left Bethel the first time testing God with a vow, he arrives back actively purifying his family of idols in order to make themselves ready to be in God's presence.

Here is the heart of a changed man. I mean, you hear it in his words in verse 3, don't you? Come, let us go up to Bethel where I will build an altar to God who answered me in the day of my distress and who has been with me wherever I have gone.

[11 : 26] It's only in this return that we see how much Jacob has actually changed. From the fleeing deceiver who tests God, we find Jacob, a father of a large family, reconciled even with Esau, called to return to Bethel trusting the Lord.

God's faithfulness has taken Jacob the fleeing deceiver and made him Jacob the faithful struggler. So I wonder, when you look back over the course of your life, where has God taken you from and where has God brought you to?

Now for some of you, you're 20 and that's actually not that long. But that doesn't mean that God hasn't done significant things in your life. If we take time to look back where we've been, we see that God has been at work on our hearts.

And in his faithfulness, he has been with us. And to be honest, if you go back into chapters 28 to 34, sometimes if you just sit and look at the detail there, you think it's never going to happen.

When we're in the detail, you just think that this man is never going to change at all. But looking back from Bethel, from the place of God's worship, Jacob sees that God's faithfulness has achieved a huge change in him.

[12 : 39] And he worships God for that. So let me ask you, what is it that you look back to when you think about God's faithfulness in your life? Maybe for some of you, you look back to your baptism, a time when you made a public declaration that Jesus was your Lord and Savior.

Those promises made in response to God's faithfulness then, are they still actively at work in your life now? Have you been growing and changing as a Christian, still holding fast those vows he made?

Tonight we're going to have communion together, and even that is a reminder of God's faithfulness, a time when we get to reflect on what the Lord is doing in our lives. Maybe you look back to a significant person who taught you about God, a friend or family member who displayed real trust in God's faithfulness that showed you the way forward.

Maybe, like Jacob, you look back on times of real struggle, both with people and with God. For some of you, you've been through immense periods of suffering and struggling. But now you can point back and say that every step of the way, though you couldn't see it at the time, God has been with you.

And from where you are now, you can say along with Jacob, God, who has answered me in the day of my distress, has been with me wherever I have gone. And that should tell us if you are currently in the midst of struggle and you can't see how God's at work in your life at all, that's okay.

[14 : 09] One day you'll be able to look back and see what God has been doing. The point is that we trust his faithfulness. Although I can't see his promises at work this second, it doesn't mean that they are false.

We don't have thoughts like that, though, for the sake of nostalgia, just to give us a warm feeling, although those sometimes do cheer us. No, we're meant to do as Jacob did.

Remembering the Lord's faithfulness leads him to doing two things. One, purifying himself and his whole family of idols. And secondly, worshipping and proclaiming the Lord's faithfulness.

Jacob found God to be so faithful that these idols, well, they had to go. They were no use. If they're coming back to the presence of the Lord, then these idols just have to be buried under the ground and forgotten.

Because what use are they? They haven't been faithful. They're created. They're made up. But God has been faithful. It's no use worshipping them. They have to go.

[15 : 10] And sometimes in our lives, Jesus' work needs to be that work of purification, ridding ourselves of whatever is competing for his trust in our lives. We must watch out for ourselves, but also for one another in this.

Notice, Jacob purified his family of idols. And we as a church family together have that responsibility for one another. So let me ask you, are you ready to humbly accept when someone says, brother or sister, you're not living in a way that honors Christ?

Are we ready to hear that? And to know that actually there are times in our life where we'll need to be pointed back in the right direction? But are we also ready to be people who admit that we are strugglers as well?

And therefore are ready to go and bring a brother or sister back? To go and say, look, you're not living in a way that honors Christ. You're not living as if God really is faithful. And calling people back.

We need each other's help in this. But it only makes sense if God is indeed as faithful as Jacob believes. But secondly, Jacob's thoughts about God's faithfulness lead him to worship and to telling the truth about God.

[16 : 23] When we reflect on what God has done in our lives, it isn't something that leads us to introspection, but to thankful worship. We aren't meant to take God's good gifts for ourselves, but to use them to worship him and to make him known.

So when you reflect on God's faithfulness to you, who are you telling about that? How are you using the story of God's faithfulness to encourage others and tell others about him? We have some old saints in our church who could tell many, many stories of God's faithfulness to them over their whole lives.

So if you want encouragement, go and ask them. Go find out how God is at work in the lives of our family. Friends, we need long memories to see this. So let's encourage each other where we can with the good news of God's faithfulness over our whole lifetimes.

But wonderfully, it's not just to Jacob that God has made these promises. So let's move on and see how the story wraps up. God's faithfulness is played out in lifetimes because he keeps his promises to his people forever.

Now, when we find an ending to a story that isn't yet totally finished, it reminds us of where we are and hints about where we're going. The first book of Lord of the Rings, what a wonderful book, Fellowship of the Ring, ends with these words from Frodo.

[17 : 41] It's no good trying to escape you, but I'm glad, Sam. I cannot tell you how glad. Come along. It's plain to see that we're meant to go together. We will go. And may the others find a safe road.

Strider will look after them. Don't suppose we shall see them again. Yet we may, Frodo, we may, said Sam. So Frodo and Sam set off on the last stage of their quest together. Shouldering their burdens, they set off, seeking a path that would bring them over the gray hills and down into a land of shadow.

Frodo and Sam have come a long way from the shire, but they still have a long way to go. The cheer of the Fellowship traveling together has come to an end. But we get a hint that they haven't even begun to see how hard this journey will be.

And they're very, very far from their goal. And we get a bit of the flavor of that in this story today as well. The ending of this Jacob storyline here in Genesis, well, actually hints that there's a lot more to come.

Notice that by this point, the curse from Genesis 3 is far from dealt with. There's still sin, there's still death everywhere. And God's promises to these people seem far from fruition.

[18 : 49] But in the ending of this scene, we're reminded that this is only an episode in a much bigger story. As you look to the rest of this passage, we'll see in all of the endings, God's faithfulness is played out in lifetimes because God keeps his promises to his people forever.

There are so many things that come to an end in this passage. We get to the end of Jacob's 20-year journey away from home. We get to the end of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, those three individuals, and it starts spreading out to the sons and then to whole nations.

In verse 8, we found out that Jacob's mother probably died, actually. Rebecca's death is never recorded in Genesis, but we hear that her nurse has died, and it reminds us that when we eventually meet Isaac, she's not there.

That chapter is closed as well. In fact, this whole end of this chapter is very bittersweet. Verses 16 to 20, we get the story of the wonderful birth of Benjamin, Jacob's final son, who would bring the tribes to around 12, but then the death of Rachel, Jacob's beloved wife.

In verse 22, we see Reuben, Jacob's eldest son, showing a dark side that hints that this story is far from over and that the future may not be smooth sailing for the family of promise.

[20 : 07] But then at the end, we get verses 27 to 29, and we get a nod to the fact that this isn't the end of Jacob's story. This is the end of Isaac's story. We haven't heard about him for almost eight chapters now, but here he is, 20 years later, he gets to see his son return home, and he's finally laid to rest by both of his sons, reconciled together, standing there at his funeral.

It's a beautiful picture. It's like an epilogue to the Isaac story. But the bittersweet nature of these endings is a clear message. This just isn't over.

The curse from Genesis 3 is still in effect. Sin and death are very present, and the story is far from done yet. But what that allows us to make sense of all of that is God's promise right in the middle of this chapter.

If you look back down at verse 11, you see God reaffirming his covenant promises that he made to both Abraham and Isaac. They're actually going to continue through Jacob's family line, but we actually get some more detail in this promise than we have previously.

I am God Almighty. Be fruitful and increase in number. Words that should make us think about actually that command that's given back in the Garden of Eden. Still in force. There's still more people to come.

[21 : 24] Then he says, Jacob's deceptions and struggles haven't changed the promises of God.

He's keeping up his covenant. And the promise of the land is reaffirmed, but this time we see that these descendants aren't going to be just one nation, but a community of nation. And from them will come kings.

God's promises will completely outlast Jacob, well, and his entire family, because God has bigger things planned than just this one family. Now imagine you are an Israelite at the time of Joshua.

You're on the verge of the promised land. You're about to go and take Canaan. And your inheritance is almost there. And then you hear the words of this story. You're about to go into the land where this happened.

You'll be able to go and see the altar at Bethel. You'll be able to go and find Rachel's grave. You will see that 400 years ago, God was keeping his promises, and he's still keeping them now.

[22 : 33] Imagine what it would be like, the shivers you'd get just going to Bethel and saying, there it is. This really happened. We can see this altar. God's promises have stayed true for, well, at least that long.

But what about 2,000 years later? Well, actually, at the start of, in the New Testament, the book of Hebrews reflects on these promises that were made 2,000 years before the writing of the book of Hebrews.

Reflects on these promises that were made to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob by saying this. And if you want to follow along, it's Hebrews chapter 11, verses 13 to 16. Let's say this.

We're told that these ancient patriarchs and their families saw the promises at a distance, far away from them, far beyond their lifetimes.

But that didn't weaken their faith. It actually kept them going to the end of their days because they believed God had something better prepared for them. Think about the story of a Bible.

[24 : 03] It starts in a garden and it ends in a city. Things have progressed. They've moved on. They've moved up. God has made something bigger. And although these promises given to Jacob were now made 4,000 years ago, they are still in force today.

Only they're now clearer for us. At the end of Hebrews 11, verses 39 and 40, it says this. These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised.

Since God was planning something better for us, that only together with us would they be made perfect. Isn't that astonishing? Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the 12 tribes were waiting for St. Silas to join the kingdom very, very far in the future.

Because not until the kingdom is complete is this done. Not until we see the curse wrapped up and everything made good and all God's people in. Not until then will God's promises be made fully known.

Because their promises for the whole earth, they go way beyond his people. One day there would indeed be a king and a land, but a way greater king and a much better promised land than Israel understood.

[25 : 15] Jesus, our king, came to save everyone and anyone who calls on the name of the Lord can now be saved. You don't need to be part of the nation or the tribe. But even now, that curse from Genesis 3 remains.

We're still in the world filled with the pains of sin and death. We need only look to the current coronavirus panic to see that the full promises of God haven't arrived yet.

But that means there's just better to come. That thought, however, need not lead us to despair, but to hope. If life is bittersweet, and friends, I know it is sometimes incredibly, incredibly hard.

But that's a sure sign that we're still waiting for the fulfillment of the promises of God. Those promises, we're told, will be fulfilled when Jesus once again comes to judge the world. One day, we will be back in the full presence of God, better than Bethel, an eternal and perfect promised land for the people of God.

And if those promises are true, then we really can put the whole weight of our trust on God. He needs an idol when you can sit content knowing your life is in the hands of your creator who loves you and sent his son to die for you.

[26 : 27] Even in the days of deepest struggle, that won't ever get in the way of his promises. We hope that we're able to say until the very day that we die those words from the hymn Amazing Grace.

His grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home. God will remain faithful to his people forever, so we can remain faithful to him in confidence.

Though the promises may well go beyond any of our lives, we hope that these sure and steadfast promises for the future will still come true. We have to admit that we are foreigners and strangers on the earth to understand that, but we know that God has prepared something far better for us.

God's faithfulness is played out in lifetimes because he keeps his promises to his people forever. So if you're here and you're a struggler of God or even a deceiver by nature, well, good news, welcome, you're in the right place and the promises of God are for you in Jesus Christ.

God loves strugglers. He loved Jacob and was faithful to him his whole life. So if you're a struggler, brilliant. God has enough time and space for you.

[27 : 36] You are a person who can come to him through Christ. And if you are someone who knows the Lord, remember that we can't always see what God is doing in the detail and day-to-day of our lives, but we regularly need to spend time looking back and seeing how he has changed us.

So let's go out telling people of our confidence and the promises that God has made to us through Jesus. That great hope of an eternal and perfect promised land that is still coming.

And let's lean the full weight of our trust on him because he keeps his promises to his people forever. Let's pray. Father, thank you that you keep your promises that you made to Jacob, to Isaac, and to Abraham.

And Lord, you have been keeping them and are still keeping them today. Lord, as we sit in the world that is still so thoroughly broken, Lord, still wrapped up in sin and death, we know that in Christ, Lord, there is hope that one day he will come again, that salvation is here and being able to come to your kingdom is possible, Lord, for anyone who calls on your name.

Father, thank you for those promises. May we believe them, strengthen us in them, and help us to purify ourselves so that we may lean our whole hope on you. In this we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

[28 : 55] Amen. We'll be able to respond in the song.