

### The Deaths of Rachael and Isaac

#### Genesis 35:16-29

Genesis 35:16-29 – *“Then they journeyed from Bethel. And when there was but a little distance to go to Ephrath, Rachel labored in childbirth, and she had hard labor. <sup>17</sup> 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.” <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem). <sup>20</sup> And Jacob set a pillar on her grave, which is the pillar of Rachel’s grave to this day.*

*<sup>21</sup> Then Israel journeyed and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder. <sup>22</sup> And it happened, when Israel dwelt in that land, that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father’s concubine; and Israel heard about it.”*

*”Now the sons of Jacob were twelve: <sup>23</sup> the sons of Leah were Reuben, Jacob’s firstborn, and Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun; <sup>24</sup> the sons of Rachel were Joseph and Benjamin; <sup>25</sup> the sons of Bilhah, Rachel’s maidservant, were Dan and Naphtali; <sup>26</sup> and the sons of Zilpah, Leah’s maidservant, were Gad and Asher. These were the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Padan Aram.”*

*<sup>27</sup> Then Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre, or Kirjath Arba, (that is, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had dwelt.*

*<sup>28</sup> Now the days of Isaac were one hundred and eighty years. <sup>29</sup> So Isaac breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people, being old and full of days. And his sons Esau and Jacob.”*

#### Background Notes

In the first half of Genesis 35 Jacob returned to Bethel. God had revealed himself to Jacob at Bethel when he fled from his brother Esau. This is where God had promised Jacob that He would protect him, and bring him safely home. Jacob seemed to avoid going to Bethel for a while, but he finally returned after the troubles at Shechem.

Bethel was associated with revival in Jacob’s life - so much so, that the phrase “Back to Bethel” has come to mean “getting your act together” with the Lord by obeying Him fully. No more partial obedience! So God wanted Jacob to come back to Bethel, and finally he did return.

In the second half of Genesis 35 Jacob returned to visit his father, Isaac, who was living at Hebron. Jacob may have visited his father during the ten years that he lived in Shechem, but this may have been the first time he saw his father since he left home thirty years earlier. We can’t be sure.

Along the way to Hebron, Jacob’s favorite wife, Rachel, died as she was giving birth to Benjamin, Jacob’s twelfth son. Rachel died near Bethlehem, and “Rachel’s Tomb” exists today between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. It may very well be the authentic site of her burial.

Verse 22 is the account of the sinful incestuous relationship between Reuben and Bilhah, one of Jacob's wives. This sin is only mentioned here, but when Jacob blessed his twelve sons, Reuben did not receive the blessing of the firstborn son. *"Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might and the beginning of my strength, the excellency of dignity and the excellency of power. Unstable as water, you shall not excel, because you went up to your father's bed; then you defiled it— he went up to my couch"* (Genesis 49:3-4). Thus Reuben lost his legal status of firstborn son.

Jacob's twelve sons are listed according to their mothers, Jacob's four wives, in verses 23-26. The twelve sons were the "fathers" of the twelve tribes of Israel. Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, became two of the tribes in Israel, so there is no tribe of Joseph. Was the land divided up thirteen ways? No, because the tribe of Levi received no tribal territory in Israel. So the land was divided up into twelve divisions.

Isaac lived for 180 years. When you put the chronology together, this means that Joseph had already been sold into Egypt by his brothers about twelve years before Isaac died. (The account of Joseph's life starts in Genesis 37.) Verse 29 says that Isaac was "gathered to his people," and buried by his sons, Jacob and Esau. Jacob and Esau may have met a few times before this, after they came to terms of peace back in Genesis 33. On the other hand, Isaac's death may be the first time they had seen each other since their meeting over twenty years earlier.

## Doctrinal Points

### 1. Faithfulness to God does not exempt the believer from times of sorrow.

Jacob's return to Bethel was a spiritual high point in his life. At that time there was revival and renewal in his own life and in the life of his family. But just when everything appeared to be going well, more sorrow and tragedy struck.

First - Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died at Bethel (v8). Deborah had been in the family for years. She was Jacob's beloved "nanny," the one who had brought him up. Then while the family was traveling to Hebron, Jacob's best-loved wife, Rachel, died in childbirth at Bethlehem. How Jacob must have mourned for his beloved Rachel! Soon after this, Reuben, Jacob's first-born, became involved in an incestuous relationship with Bilhah, one of Jacob's wives. How this sin must have grieved Jacob's heart.

And then there was the loss of his favorite son, Joseph. It was about this time that Joseph was betrayed by his brothers and sold into Egypt. When Jacob thought that a wild beast had killed his favorite son, he wept and could not be comforted (Genesis 37). Think of the heart-wrenching sorrow! Then Isaac, his father, died. All these events took place in the course of about twelve years, after Jacob returned to Bethel.

How did Jacob feel at that time? He had come back to the Land, and he had come “back to Bethel” - back to the Lord. He was walking with the Lord, but now his life was filled with sorrow upon sorrow. At this point, Jacob must have had questions about what was going on!

Is it possible that you are going through a time of sorrow just now? In Genesis 35, God is teaching us that faithfulness to God does not exempt the believer from times of sorrow. Don't assume that a time of sorrow in your life means that you have been unfaithful. Don't think that God is against you, or that He doesn't really love you. Don't become angry and bitter towards God! And don't try to figure God out.

We don't know all the reasons why God allows times of sorrow. However, we know that we won't get to know the Lord as the “God of comfort” unless we have a time of sorrow, when we desperately need to be comforted. So one reason why God allows us to go through times of sorrow is that a time of grief is the only way we'll come to know Him as the God of comfort.

There are certainly many other reasons as well. David said in Psalm 119:71, *“It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes.”* We learn more of God in times of sorrow. Faithfulness to God does not exempt the believer from times of sorrow.

## **2. The faithfulness of God will sustain the believer in times of sorrow.**

Through all those times of sorrow, Jacob was sustained by God, and continued to grow in favor. As Rachel was dying, she named her newborn son Ben-Oni, which means “son of my sorrow.” However, Jacob called him Benjamin, which means “son of my right hand.” This is an indication that Jacob, even in his sorrow, was sustained by the faithfulness of God. He was able to see, even in a time of grief, that **God was in control of the events of his life.**

Let me ask you - in times of sorrow, do you concentrate on your sorrow and grief, or do you look to the Lord to sustain you in your sorrow? It makes a big difference! Follow the model of Jacob here. He went through some great times of sorrow, but he did not become bitter and blame the Lord. He looked to the Lord for strength and comfort, and he was sustained.

My wife, Margie, recently told me of a woman in her Bible study group who has gone through times of great sorrow. About twelve years ago, her husband, who was a top executive of a large multi-national corporation and a very sharp man, was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease while only in his 50's. With God's help, this woman faithfully nursed her husband for several years as he grew steadily worse and became completely helpless. Some time after his death, she re-married a man who was a long-time Christian friend. They were happily married for a couple of years, but just two weeks ago her new husband died instantly following a heart attack. Sorrow upon sorrow! And yet this woman was at the Bible study last week, and thanking God for his faithfulness in her time of grief. What a tremendous testimony! The faithfulness of God will sustain the believer in times of sorrow.

## **Practical Application**

### **Do you say “Ben-Oni” or “Benjamin” in your time of sorrow?**

Ben-Oni means “son of my sorrow,” and Benjamin means “son of my right hand.” Rachel called her son Ben-Oni – “son of my sorrow.” Jacob called his son Benjamin – “son of my right hand.” You see, when you say “Ben-Oni,” you are tending to look only at the human side of the sorrow, and at the past. When you can say “Benjamin,” you are looking at the divine side of the sorrow - at the sovereignty of God, and of how God can use this sorrow to accomplish His good purposes for the future.

Many times this is very hard to do. Times of grief may engender a serious spiritual battle. If we look at the human side of the sorrow, we may be tempted to be disappointed and disillusioned with God, and even become bitter. On the other hand, if we look the divine side of the sorrow, we'll trust in God's sovereignty, and depend on Him for strength to sustain us in our grief.

We know a Christian family whose teenaged son was killed several years ago through a freak accident. His Christian mother has never been able to accept his death, and she continues to blame God for allowing it to happen. She is destroying the rest of the family. They even left the church, because she refused to accept the support of her fellow believers who were reaching out to help her and encourage her. It's a very sad. She has never been able to look at the divine side of the story.

What about you? What about me? Will we say “Ben-Oni” - or will we say “Benjamin” - in our times of sorrow?