

READ

Genesis 35

REFLECT

When Jacob wrested the mysterious stranger in the middle of the night (God?), he received a new name – Israel. And now, several chapters later, he is named Israel yet again. This happens a lot in Genesis, two stories are told of the same event because there were two traditions that were made into a single story. It's to be expected because what became Genesis began with a long oral history before it was written. In this tradition Jacob recommits himself to the faith of his ancestors at the same altar he'd setup while on the run from his brother. There he cast aside all the foreign gods he'd gathered in his travels and God recommitted to the promise given Abraham, Isaac, and now Jacob/Israel. Like his father and grandfather (and Noah), Jacob is commanded to be fertile and multiply. He is also told of kings coming from his descendants, an amazing thing to be promised. Upon leaving Bethel, Israel got right to God's command, and Rachel, his favorite wife, got pregnant again. This birth wasn't happy, though, because Rachel died. Still, Israel was left with a son – Benjamin. Israel would go on to love Benjamin more than his other sons, seeing him as the last vestige of his favorite wife, and setting up some of the drama that is to come.

Another future piece of drama is set up as Reuben has an affair with his Bilhah, Leah's maid turned Israel's wife. No extra information is given about this very strange happening, but words aren't wasted in scripture – this will come back up. After the birth of Benjamin, we're reminded of who Israel's sons are, and who their mothers were – six from Leah and two each from Rachel, Bilhah, and Zilpah. The rest of Genesis will focus on these children – they make up the 12 tribes of Israel, after all – but not before we're given one last encounter with Isaac. Years after he'd given his final blessing to Jacob, Isaac died. Esau and Israel united once again to bury their father, a wonderful end to the tumultuous relationship that had been disrupted and become so painful by attempts to steal their father's love.

REACT

- Throughout Genesis we are given multiple accounts of the same story. It happened with the renaming of Abraham, there are multiple inconsistencies in Noah's story, and here again with Jacob/Israel. How do you reconcile these conflicts, or have you ever even noticed them?
- In the midst of the miracle that is childbirth, Israel suffered the death of his favorite wife. We all face moments of incredible joy and unbearable pain, sometimes at the same time, just as Israel did. How have you been able to cope with extreme pain? How have you been able to hold on to immense joy?
- Reuben's affair is a very odd detail to get thrown into the story. Why'd he do it? How did his family respond? We're given none of those answers, so we just have to make up our own. When strange events, those without easy answers, happen in your life, what do you do? Have you made up answers for yourself – those that make you feel better or those that make you spiral into despair? Have you simply ignored them?

RESPOND

Recommitting to our faith: God appeared to Jacob and commanded him to go to a site of importance – the shrine he'd erected way back in chapter 28 after God spoke to him in a dream and made a promise to him. With 11 sons, at least 1 daughter, four wives, and a reconciled relationship with Esau, it seems as though God has made good on that promise. Jacob ridded himself and his household of foreign gods and recommitted himself to his faith. God, in return, reiterated the promise and then renamed Jacob to Israel.

Recommitment can often be a powerful event, for marriages and more. While we don't rebaptize, we do celebrate renewal of the covenant of baptism. In this ritual we recommit ourselves to the same questions asked of us (or our parents) when we were baptized. Consider them now:

- *Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn away from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?*
- *Who is your Lord and Savior?*
- *Will you be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his word and showing his love?*