

A closer look at the book of Genesis reveals a consistent pattern that weaves its way through our narrative. That pattern comprises four parts:

1. A figure emerges on the Biblical stage.
2. That person builds a defining legacy through his or her actions.
3. He or she passes from the scene.
4. The cycle begins anew with someone else.

Every significant figure we've encountered within the Biblical book of Genesis has thus left an enduring legacy, a heritage shaped and defined by their choices and decisions. For instance, [Abel's](#) legacy is defined by his [upright character](#). [Noah's legacy](#) is one of [unwavering faith](#) in God as he dwelled in a world [permeated by evil](#). [Abraham](#) left [a powerful and enduring legacy](#) characterized by his [faith and devotion to God](#). These positive legacies continue to guide and inspire us today.

However, there are others who crafted vastly different legacies. For example, there was Cain, a man who became humanity's first [murderer](#). There was Laban, a [scheming, manipulative swindler](#). Then we have the [citizens](#) of Sodom and Gomorrah. They were so [wicked](#) that God [completely annihilated](#) their [civilization](#).

These actions influence the way we remember these individuals today, for their choices established the legacies they've left behind. For better or worse, those choices are now irreversible, and they are forever defined by who and what they were.

These examples remind us that everyone teaches through the example of their lives. Some teach us what to do, and others teach us what *not* to do. The primary difference between these Biblical characters and modern-day audiences is that God has not chosen to display our lives through the magnifying lens of Scripture.

With these things in mind, we can ask a pertinent question: what kind of legacy are we crafting with our life choices today? What investments are we making with the lives God has entrusted to us? What are we doing with the time, talent, and opportunities He has graciously provided? These Biblical examples should prompt us to consider those questions carefully.

Genesis chapter thirty-five will conclude Jacob's role as a central figure within this book, for the following chapters will shift our focus to the lives of his sons. Here in Genesis thirty-five, Jacob will encounter a complex interplay of positive and negative events, as well as the tragic loss of some cherished family members. But God will sustain Jacob through those events and encourage him in the midst of his adversities.

“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).

About three decades had passed since Jacob's initial encounter with God in the place he called Bethel. That was the area where Jacob viewed a stairway between heaven and earth with the angels of God ascending and descending upon it. At the top stood the Lord Himself, according to Genesis 28:13.

God spoke to Jacob at that very place, saying...

“...I am the Lord, the God of your grandfather Abraham, and the God of your father, Isaac. The ground you are lying on belongs to you. I am giving it to you and your descendants. Your descendants will be as numerous as the dust of the earth! They will spread out in all directions—to the west and the east, to the north and the south. And all the families of the earth will be blessed through you and your descendants.

What's more, I am with you, and I will protect you wherever you go. One day I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have finished giving you everything I have promised you”
(Genesis 28:13-15 NLT).

So God was calling Jacob back to a familiar land where they shared a common history. But first, Jacob had some cleaning up to do...

“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).

Although Jacob was leading his family in the right direction, there was something amiss. Notice Jacob said, ***“Get rid of the foreign gods you have with you...”*** (CEB) and not, ***“If you have any foreign gods, discard them.”*** This suggests that Jacob was aware of his family’s idolatrous practices, but had failed to address that situation.

So how did these foreign gods find their way into Jacob’s family? Well, we know that Jacob’s wife Rachel had two or more of them, for [she had earlier stolen them](#) from her father, Laban. It’s also possible that Jacob’s sons looted some of those idols from Shechem after they [plundered the city](#). If the people of Shechem possessed idols that were crafted from precious metals, they were likely included among the spoils they seized from that area.

But now, in light of Jacob’s renewed relationship with God, those elements had to be removed. So, by instructing his family to ***“purify yourselves and change your clothes”*** (NIV), Jacob stressed the importance of internal and external cleanliness before God.

“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).

Jacob’s sons had earlier [responded](#) to the sexual assault that had been perpetrated against their sister by executing every male inhabitant in the city of Shechem. Jacob subsequently answered by saying, ***“You have gotten me into trouble; now the Canaanites, the Perizzites, and everybody else in the land will hate me. I do not have many men; if they all band together against me and attack me, our whole family will be destroyed”*** (GNB).

The people of the surrounding areas were not likely to forget what happened, and Jacob was clearly concerned. But Genesis 35:5 tells us that God's intervened to protect Jacob and his family from retribution. This does not mean that God approved of what his sons had done, but it does tell us that Jacob's family benefited from His protection as they acted on His directive. This passage thus underscores the importance of following God’s instruction, regardless of what the external factors might seem to indicate.

“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” (Genesis 35:6-7).

For contemporary audiences, the name “El Bethel” may evoke the image of a sun-drenched city in Mexico, Central America, or the southwestern United States. However, this name actually carries great Biblical significance.

You see, the “El” portion of this name refers to God. “Beth” means, “*house of*.” So when taken together, “El Bethel” means, “*God of the house of God*.” ⁽¹⁾ While this may seem redundant, it actually serves as an important reminder. Although there may be many places that seek to be identified as a house of God, the real question is, “Is God the God of that house of God, or is it simply a building with religious aspirations?”

“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” (Genesis 35:8).

Although she wasn’t mentioned by name, Deborah was a member of the [entourage](#) who joined Jacob’s mother Rebekah when she left to marry Jacob’s father Isaac (see Genesis chapter [twenty-four](#)). That means Deborah was someone who had been a part of Jacob’s life since his birth.

So Deborah must have been very old at the time of her passing. Unfortunately, we have no other information regarding her, or why she left Rebekah to travel with Jacob. However, she must have been a beloved family member, for the place of her burial (*Allon Bachuth*) means “*Oak of Weeping*.” ⁽²⁾

(1) See H410 - ’ēl - *Strong’s Hebrew Lexicon (kjv)*. (n.d.). Blue Letter Bible.

<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h410/kjv/wlc/0-1/> and H1008 - bêt-’ēl - *Strong’s Hebrew Lexicon (kjv)*. (n.d.). Blue Letter Bible. <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h1008/kjv/wlc/0-1/>

(2) H439 - ’allôn bākûṭ - *Strong’s Hebrew Lexicon (kjv)*. (n.d.). Blue Letter Bible.

<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h439/kjv/wlc/0-1/>

“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” (Genesis 35:9-10).

God had already renamed Jacob as “Israel” earlier in [Genesis chapter thirty-two](#). So why would He repeat that action here in Genesis thirty-five? To address that question, it helps to remember that Jacob’s name conveyed the image of a swindler, deceiver, or thief. On the other hand, Jacob’s new name (Israel) meant “*God prevails*.” ⁽¹⁾

Unfortunately, Jacob had not been living up to the meaning of his new name over the last few chapters of our narrative. So, by renaming Jacob once more, God effectively reminded him of what he had become, instead of what he had been. Thus, as the New Testament book of 2 Corinthians reminds us...

“...if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

(1) See <https://traed.net/wp-content/uploads/32-Genesis-Chapter-Thirty-Two.pdf> (page 6)

“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. 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” (Genesis 35:11-15).

Many municipal areas feature memorials that commemorate an important person or significant event. In a similar manner, these verses tell us that Jacob memorialized the place where God spoke with him.

Jacob poured oil and a drink offering upon that memorial, two actions that carried great symbolic meaning. First, the drink offering comprised a liquid that symbolized those who were prepared to “[pour their lives out](#)” in service to God. While this is the first time we encounter such an offering within the Scriptures, it will later become an [important part](#) of the spiritual lives of Jacob’s descendants.

Next was the act of pouring oil upon this memorial. This practice is often associated with the act of being set apart for God. We see this act of consecration most prominently in the life of Aaron, the first person whom God ordained to serve as Israel’s High Priest (see [Leviticus 8:12](#)).

So, in taking this action, Jacob took an external step that demonstrated his internal commitment to honor God.

“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” (Genesis 35:16).

The town of Ephrath was about fifteen miles (24 km) south of Bethel. Jacob and his family were en route to that destination when his wife Rachel began the birthing process.

With the advent of modern medical technology, it's easy to forget that there were no hospitals or emergency rooms available for someone with a medical emergency in Rachel's era. A pregnant woman had no one to assist her during childbirth except a midwife, if one was available.

Childbearing thus presented a significant (and potentially life-threatening) risk during that time. Sadly, Rachel fell victim to that heartbreaking reality...

“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).

Rachel had once been so desperate to bear children that she said to Jacob, “...***Give me children, or else I die!***” ([Genesis 30:1](#)). Thus, it is a poignant irony to learn that Rachel’s intense yearning for motherhood coincided with her tragic death.

As her life was slipping away, Rachel named her son Ben-Oni, a name that means “*son of my sorrow*.”

(1) However, Jacob evidently sought to protect his son from the burden of a name that served as a constant reminder of his mother’s passing. So he gave his son a new name: Benjamin, a name that means, “*son of the right hand*.” (2)

This reference to one's “right hand” carried great cultural significance in that era. Since most people are right-handed, the right hand symbolized the highest level of skill and strength. That eventually led to a further identification with the concepts of favor and blessing. Benjamin’s name thus evokes a portrait of honor instead of sorrow.

We should also recognize the fact that Benjamin was the last surviving link to Jacob’s beloved wife, Rachel, the woman he cherished above all others. The depth and intensity of Jacob’s attachment to Benjamin will become increasingly evident as our narrative unfolds.

(1) H1126 - ben-’ônî - *Strong’s Hebrew Lexicon (kjv)*. (n.d.). Blue Letter Bible. <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h1126/kjv/wlc/0-1/>

(2) H1144 - binyāmîn - *Strong’s Hebrew Lexicon (kjv)*. (n.d.). Blue Letter Bible. <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h1144/kjv/wlc/0-1/>

Following Rachel's death, Jacob and his family continued on their travels...

“Then Israel journeyed and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder” (Genesis 35:21).

We should note that Genesis 35:21 refers to Jacob as “Israel.” This detail is important in light of Rachel's passing. You see, Rachel's tragic death may have left Jacob spiritually and emotionally distraught. Nevertheless, we're told, “...***Israel*** (or, “*God prevails*”) ***moved on...***” (NIV). This offers a practical application for modern-day readers of this passage.

Although life inevitably brings periods of sadness, grief, and sorrow, we often find it difficult to heal and move on from painful emotional experiences like the loss of a loved one. But our text from Genesis 35:21 reminds us that “God prevails” in such circumstances.

Since God is the One who ultimately prevails over the events of our lives, those who trust in Him can find strength to move beyond the painful experiences that might leave others shattered or broken, and thus find opportunities for growth and resilience.

“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...” (Genesis 35:22).

Bilhah had been Rachel's servant and later gave birth to Jacob's sons, Dan and Naphtali ([Genesis 30:1-8](#)). This makes it difficult to understand why this incident happened. Perhaps Bilhah had grown tired of her subordinate role in the wake of Rachel's death and sought to rebuke Jacob for his failure to promote her status.

It's also possible that Jacob distanced himself from Bilhah following Rachel's death. That would have left an emotional void that she sought to fill through a relationship with the only person who would dare sleep with the concubine of the family's patriarch- the eldest son. Or perhaps Bilhah and Reuben were just sexually attracted to one another.

Whatever the reason, no one mentioned this incident at the time. But Israel knew about it- and Reuben's decision to dishonor his father in this manner will lead to future repercussions.

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

These verses offer a brief genealogical summary of Jacob's descendants. These are the men who will ultimately fulfill the covenant that God established with Jacob's grandfather [Abraham](#), his father [Isaac](#), and [Jacob](#) himself.

We'll take a closer look at Jacob's sons later in our study of the book of Genesis. But as we'll see, these twelve individuals will not offer the best examples to follow, at least to start. In fact, many of Jacob's sons will eventually demonstrate some troubling and significant character flaws.

In this respect, Jacob's sons are not unlike the men Jesus later called to be His disciples. For instance, [Jesus' disciples](#) comprised a group of men who seemingly offered little of spiritual value. Nevertheless, God enabled them to overcome their rough beginnings and reach their potential to be everything He created them to be. He can do the same for us as well.

“Then Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre, or Kirjath Arba (that is, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had dwelt. Now the days of Isaac were one hundred and eighty years. 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 buried him” (Genesis 35:27-29).

It's interesting to note how the final verses of Genesis thirty-five describe Isaac's passing. For instance, this passage tells us that Isaac was "***gathered to his people***" at the time of his death. This term has important implications for our view of the afterlife, for it means that Isaac could not be "***gathered to his people***" if there was no prospect of life after death for those who preceded him.