

In Genesis 35, there are so many comforts for us from the most painful of experiences! Death is frequently in the news of late – and some of us are facing the “valley of the shadow” with our loved ones as well. These notes (this week and next) are sent with the prayer that God will show Himself to be “the God of All Comfort,” (2 Corinthians 1:3) as we learn from the deaths of some precious members of Jacob’s family.

Monday: Read Genesis 35:8

Memorials of Love

In Gen. 35:8, Jacob’s family experiences a significant loss. The aged Deborah, who was Jacob’s mother’s nurse (Gen. 24:59) passes from this world with so much weeping that they name her burial place “Oak of Weeping.” Matthew Henry explains how this elderly housemaid of Rebekah’s could have ended up in Jacob’s household: *“We have reason to think that Jacob, after he came to Canaan, while his family dwelt near Shechem, went himself (it is likely, often) to visit his father Isaac at Hebron. Rebekah probably was dead, but her old nurse Deborah survived her, and Jacob took her to his family, to be a companion to his wives, her country-women, and an instructor to his children.”*

Meditate and Pray: Thank God that He can take foreigners and aliens like this woman Deborah and settle them not only in the Promised Land but also in the Household of Faith, giving them much valued work to do. Where would the twelve sons of Jacob as founders of the tribes of Israel have been without the guidance and nursing care of servants like this woman? It is the same way in His Church, our Household of Faith, where we, though foreigners, can nevertheless have many spiritual bonds closer than flesh and blood. For God has promised, “I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty” (2 Corinthians 6:18).

Tuesday: Read Genesis 35:8-12

Memorials of Transformation

As Jacob walked through the Land of Canaan, God changed the spiritual geography of that pagan place, where “under every spreading tree” the foreign gods of the nations were known to be worshipped – see Jeremiah 3:13 and Ezekiel 6:13. These pagan groves of immoral worship were transformed by God into places where Abraham, Isaac and Jacob built altars and called upon the name of the Lord. For example, see the “great trees” of Moreh at Shechem (Gen. 12:6) and Mamre (Gen. 18:1) where the Lord appeared to Abraham and where Abraham built altars. In the same way, the oak tree below Bethel (Gen. 35:8) became a sacred memorial to the death of Deborah.

Meditate and Pray: Thank God for His transforming Grace, which is able to transform dens and sewers of iniquity into holy places of worship. Isn’t that what God does in each of our lives when we become believers and our bodies become His temples? “Thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness” (Romans 6:17-18).

Wednesday: Read Genesis 35:8-13 and Psalm 84:10-12**Memorials of Faith**

I think we can be confident that Deborah was welcomed into the company of believers. As proof of this, consider first that her death is mourned in Scripture beyond any amount of mourning attached to the deaths of unbelievers. Those outside God's saving Grace generally end life with the same terrible refrain: "When so-and-so died, his son succeeded him as king..." (Gen. 36:32-39). In this way the lives of the wicked are cut-off from any future history, whereas the history of God's covenant people continues, recorded with far more accuracy and length of description. Second, consider that Deborah's dying place is memorialized – which Holy Scripture never does to those who die in unbelief. We don't know, for example, where Ishmael, Esau or others like them were buried, but the graves of believers are named and remembered. God's people do not weep at the grave of men like Esau and his family – despite his status as the eldest son of Isaac – but they do at the grave of this lowly servant Deborah who had no family to call her own! Truly the "first shall be last and the last first!"

Meditate and Pray: "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" (1 John 3:1). Thank God for the great act of Grace by which you have been adopted into the royal family of the Lord. Ask Him to keep you, your believing friends, family and church humble in the face of such adopting Grace. May we embrace the lowliest position in the House of God rather than enjoy the high status of those like Esau outside of God's favor. Truly, we would "rather be a doorkeeper in the house of our God than dwell in the tents of the wicked" (Psalm 84:10).

Thursday: Read Genesis 35:8-13 and Hebrews 12:1-3**Memorials of Comfort**

How desolate and lonely we can feel when the pillars of our youth, the wiser ones of generations past, leave us bereft of their counsel and presence. "Where are you when I needed you most?" can be our cry. Surely Jacob must have grieved the death of Deborah, one of his last ties to his mother's life. Jacob may well have spent much time with Deborah. After all, Jacob "was a quiet man, staying among the tents" (Gen. 25:27). Surely he must have enjoyed hours of fellowship with Deborah and his mother Rebekah! Now that was all gone. Where are we to turn when death robs us of so much we held dear in terms of human relationships?

No wonder God comes closer to Jacob at just this moment of desolating loneliness, promising Jacob with a new word not used before in the book of Genesis -- that from him nothing less than a "*community* of nations" would come! God lifts Jacob's eyes to the concourse of believers who would one day surround the throne of God in heaven!

Meditate and Pray: In the same way, may we in our times of loneliness and grief fix our eyes on Jesus and the great cloud of witnesses (Heb. 12:1-2) whose fellowship one day will blot out all our memories of being forlorn. As the Hymn writer puts it in the words of the comforting hymn, "Till He Come" (# 426 *Trinity Hymnal*, verses 2-3):

*When the weary ones we love
enter on their rest above,
seems the earth so poor and vast,
all our life-joy overcast?
Hush be every murmur dumb:
it is only till he come."*

*Clouds and conflicts round us press:
would we have one sorrow less?
All the sharpness of the cross,
all that tells the world is loss,
death and darkness and the tomb,
only whisper, 'Till he come.'"*

Friday: Read Genesis 35:13-15 and Isaiah 57:15**Memorials of His Presence**

Jacob responds to God's reassuring words to him by memorializing the place, consecrating a stone pillar with oil and renewing the name of this place where God talked to him as "Bethel."

Here is a question: if *you* were a descendant of Jacob and came to this place, Bethel, years later, what would you think were the most important elements for Jacob of this place of revelation? Well, notice first that in Gen. 35:13 it says that the Lord "went up from him." This was something new never to be forgotten: God appeared to Jacob this time at Bethel in plain sight – not in a dark dream in the middle of the night as he had done earlier in Gen. 28:13. There it was God in a dream, at the top of a high ladder way up in heaven speaking from afar. Now, it is God appearing to Jacob clearly and in close fellowship. God comes down to Jacob at Bethel to renew His covenant with him.

Meditate and Pray: Thank God that His desire is to "dwell among His people." Yes, He is the "high and lofty One," as the prophet Isaiah reminds us in Isaiah 57:15 – but He is also one to dwell with the contrite and lowly, in order to revive their spirits and hearts. Do you need reviving? God is content to come down to your level and bind up the wounds of your broken heart. In the words of hymn # 615 in our *Trinity Hymnal*:

*Come, ye disconsolate, where're ye languish,
come to the mercy seat, fervently kneel:
here bring your wounded hearts,
here tell your anguish;
earth has no sorrows that heav'n cannot heal.*

*Joy of the comfortless, light of the straying,
hope of the penitent, fadeless and pure!
Here speaks the Comforter, in mercy saying,
"Earth has no sorrows that heav'n cannot cure."*

As you prepare for this weekend, ask God to give you a heart that loves to dwell with the lowly, and to bind up the wounds of the contrite - for this is a crowning attribute of the God we serve: "Grace for the lowly and the broken." Moreover, since God is willing to "come down" and dwell with His people, especially as they worship at the "House of God," may our church become in reality a heavenly oasis of communion with the Lord for those like Jacob who first stumbled into Bethel with nothing but rocks for his pillows and a staff in his hand. Amen.