

Renewed
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Genesis 35:1-15

We can all imagine the scene: As a newly minted teenage driver leaves the house, the parent says: *"Whatever you do, remember who you are!"* What is that parent really saying? Why is a strong sense of identity – really knowing who you are – important?

Often the children of famous people struggle to live up to their family name. Some of them also struggle to distance themselves from their family's notorious identity.

Queen Elizabeth II is a good example striving to live up to her family name. She became Queen of England at age 25 and by most accounts she upheld the traditions and responsibilities associated with her family name in her 70 years as the longest reigning Monarch in the UK. In a speech on her 21st birthday, the future Queen promised, *"I declare before you all that my whole life, whether it be long or short, shall be devoted to your service and the service of our great imperial family to which we all belong."* Queen Elizabeth took her family name seriously.

Names in Scripture carried deep symbolic and spiritual significance, often revealing aspects of a person's identity, destiny, or relationship with God. In this morning's text we see God repeat and reinforce Jacob's new identity given to Him after Jacob literally wrestled with God (Gen.32). When God changed Jacob's name to Israel, He changed Jacob's identity from "heel grabber or deceiver" to "one who...struggled with God and...men, and...prevailed."ⁱⁱ

The point: When we trust Christ as Savior and Lord, God the Father makes us a "new creation (2. Cor. 5:17)" and gives us a new identity. His word and His Spirit remind us of who we are and Whose we are. When sin gets us off track, He lovingly (and firmly) draws us to rededicate ourselves to live up to our identity in Christ.

Before the text, a little context: About twenty years passed since we saw Jacob getting wealthy on speckled sheep. Jacob took his family and fled his uncle/father-in-law Laban and made peace with his brother Esau. Chapter 34 describes a dark chapter involving Jacob's daughter Dinah. We see sexual assault, revenge, mass murder and kidnapping in the name of vigilante justice. The actions of two of Jacob's sons turned the family's reputation from the founding family of Israel to "the Sopranos of Shechem." Jacob knew his family had seriously drifted from God's plan and God was calling him to return to Bethel and to remember his true covenant identity as the founding father of Israel.

(NLT) — **1** Then God said to Jacob, "Get ready and move to Bethel and settle there. Build an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother, Esau." **2** So Jacob told everyone in his household, "Get rid of all your pagan idols, purify yourselves, and put on clean clothing. **3** We are now going to Bethel, where I will build

an altar to the God who answered my prayers when I was in distress. He has been with me wherever I have gone.” **4** So they gave Jacob all their pagan idols and earrings, and he buried them under the great tree near Shechem. **5** As they set out, a terror from God spread over the people in all the towns of that area, so no one attacked Jacob’s family.

- If you grew up in a church with an “altar call” you may recall some of the saints walking the aisle for “rededication.” They were saved but they felt the Spirit of God tugging at their hearts that sin had put distance between them and God.
- They were making a public commitment to get back to their identity in Christ.
- God’s call for Jacob to return to Bethel was a call for “rededication” and a return to the identity God gave him in that place after a holy wrestling match (Gen. 32).
- Jacob knew his family’s first step to rededication was to get rid of the things that made them stumble. Specifically, to bury their false idols.
- Wiersbe: *“Before he could take his company back to the altar...Jacob had to “clean house”—the strange gods and the jewelry associated with heathen worship had to be buried. The only place for sin is in the grave.”ⁱⁱⁱ*
- Christ-followers need to examine our lives for an idols we have accumulated.
- Jacob also called on his family to clean up their bodies and put on clean clothes.
- Was this the origin of the Saturday night bath and dressing up on Sunday?
- One commentator writes, *“We would all benefit from a “spiritual bath” to confess and get rid of sin before we go to church. This is making ourselves pure. For some people, [just getting] clean is their [Sunday] “best.” For others, their heart tells them that wearing their best is showing God His value to them. For still others, there needs to be a caution that their best isn’t merely showing off.”*
- How we dress for worship has changed and it’s a personal choice. God looks at the heart and not external appearances (1 Sam. 16:7). Whether it is suits and dresses or jeans and sweaters, we should look like we are dressed modestly and appropriately for an important gathering with God’s people.
- Verse 5 tells us God protected Jacob’s family as they journeyed to Bethel.
- Matthew Henry: *“When we are about God’s work, we are under special protection. God is with us...and, if he be for us, who can be against us?”^{iv}*

6 Eventually, Jacob and his household arrived at Luz (also called Bethel) in Canaan. **7** Jacob built an altar there and named the place El-bethel (which means “God of Bethel”), because God had appeared to him there when he was fleeing from his brother, Esau. — **9** Now that Jacob had returned from Paddan-aram, God appeared to him again at Bethel. God blessed him, **10** saying, “Your name is Jacob, but you will not be called Jacob any longer. From now on your name will be Israel.” So God renamed him Israel. **11** Then God said, “I am El-Shaddai—‘God Almighty.’ Be fruitful and multiply. You will become a great nation, even many nations. Kings will be among your descendants! **12** And I will give you the land I once gave to Abraham and Isaac. Yes, I will give it to you and your descendants after you.”

- God had already given these promises and this new name to Jacob (Gen. 32). Why do you think He chose to reiterate all this again? How can we get a “refresher” from our Heavenly Father about the promises He has made to us?

- When a follower of Christ reads God’s word, He uses His Holy Spirit living inside us to remind us of our identity in Christ. Verses like:
 - Romans 15:7 | You are accepted.
 - John 15:16 | You are chosen.
 - Galatians 4:7 | You are free.
 - 1 John 1:9 | You are forgiven.
 - 2 Corinthians 5:17 | You are a new person.
 - Genesis 1:27 | You are made in God's image.
 - 1 Corinthians 3:23 | You belong to Jesus.
 - John 1:12 | You are a child of God.
- Reading verses like that should cause us to ask, “*Am I living up to that identity as a “child of the King?”*” If the answer is no, then like Jacob, we need rededication.
- After Jacob made his rededication he wanted to demonstrate it publicly.

13 Then God went up from the place where he had spoken to Jacob. **14** Jacob set up a stone pillar to mark the place where God had spoken to him. Then he poured wine over it as an offering to God and anointed the pillar with olive oil. **15** And Jacob named the place Bethel (which means “house of God”), because God had spoken to him there.

- Several weeks ago, when we studied Genesis 28, we talked about this practice of raising a stone to mark significant places where God made promises.
- Instead of stone pillars, our “markers” might be an entry in a journal, a highlighted scripture in our Bible, or perhaps a Post-It note on a mirror.
- However we choose to “set up a stone” it is important part that it reminds us as Jacob’s pillar reminded him that “God has spoken to us there.”

So, What’s the Takeaway?

- When we trust Christ as Savior and Lord, God makes us a “new creation and gives us a new identity. He expects us to live a life worthy of that identity (Eph.4:1).
- Here’s the good news: If we have trusted Christ and Savior and Lord, our eternal future with Him in Heaven is secure because Jesus paid for it once for all time.
- The bad news: As long as we are breathing air, we are simply “saved sinners” who can accumulate idols that come between us and our Heavenly Father.
- We also live in a world that can leave us “dirty” and in need of a spiritual bath.
- God’s word and His Spirit are there to remind us who we are and Whose we are.
- When sin gets us off track, our Heavenly Father lovingly (and firmly) draws us to rededicate ourselves to live up to our identity in Christ.
- Thanks to Jesus, we don’t have to “go back to Bethel” physically to recommit to our identity in Him. Our rededication can happen anytime and anywhere by simply confessing where we’ve fallen short and returning to the path that glorifies Him. It’s the path laid out in scripture and confirmed by His Spirit.
- So, when we get ready to walk out that door each day, let’s hear the voice of our Heavenly Father saying, “*Whatever you do and wherever you go today, remember who you are and Whose you are. You were bought with high price. Be sure you live like that!*”

ⁱ <https://www.royal.uk/21st-birthday-speech-21-april-1947>

ⁱⁱ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Ge 32:28). (2016). Crossway Bibles.

ⁱⁱⁱ Wiersbe, W. W. (1993). [*Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the Old Testament*](#) (Ge 35–36). Victor Books.

^{iv} Henry, M. (1994). [*Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible: complete and unabridged in one volume*](#) (p. 75). Hendrickson.