

Life under God's Hand

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[0 : 0 0] Now, I've been thinking that as I get older, I find that life's choices or the choices I have in life start to dwindle as I age.

I don't know whether some of you feel that way as well. But nowadays, I do look back on my youth and sort of marvel at the freedoms and choices that I used to have.

Now, if you're a teenager or younger, not many of you, yeah, a few of you here today, you may sort of scoff at the very idea of that. Because to you, it might seem that actually you have no freedom at all.

That you always need to get permission from your parents for almost everything. Birthday parties, the amount of screen time you get, and even how often you can have ice cream for dessert.

Or is that just the chill household? But, you know, wait until you finish school or get your driver's license, and then suddenly the world, or maybe just Melbourne, is your oyster.

[1 : 0 6] You can decide whether you want to get a part-time job, and then, you know, do with the extra cash however you want. Maybe a holiday with friends, or saving money for a car.

When the weekend comes around, those leisure hours are yours to spend as you will. You feel like a weekend in the country, or sleeping after a hard week at work, or catch the latest superhero movie with your friends.

It's all before you that you can do without too much fuss. Then you get the freedom to make choices about your career, or perhaps even put it on hold as you backpack across Europe.

You can even decide to study a master's while you work, or not, as the case may be. But the possibilities are endless, and there aren't too many restraints on you in choosing what you want to do with it.

And then you get older, and for some of us, we get married and have children. We buy a house, which often comes with a mortgage. And then all of a sudden, these things limit our choices in life.

[2 : 1 7] Fancy a movie night with your wife? Ha! Maybe you get to turn on 10 play in the middle of the night while you're feeding your baby.

That leisurely drive down the coast this weekend. Or just be thankful that you can stop for a coffee between Junior's footy game and his sister's ballet classes.

And with that mortgage you have to pay, well, the option to just quit your job just because you hate the hours, well, that's not there anymore, is it? Now, please don't think I'm complaining, because Elissa and I love our girls dearly.

And we wouldn't have life any other way. That's true, girls. You're looking down. But the reality is that as responsibilities mount with age, then so do the restrictions on our freedom.

And I haven't even started to mention what age does to things like our physical strength and our health, which limit us even more. And so as we consider Jacob's life tonight, one of the things that struck me is really how little freedom that he's had.

[3 : 29] We've seen him sort of throughout this whole series, and we've followed his ups and downs in life. And we often think of Jacob as that deceiver, the one that is able to plot every move, that tries to gain an advantage in life.

But really, except for a couple of incidents, much of his life actually has been dictated for him by others, including God. So yes, at the very start, he had the initiative to deceive Esau of his birthright.

But then straight after, it's actually mum, Rebecca, that made him bring in the goats, so he could serve the meal to deceive dad and Esau. And then in Esau's revenge, it was again Rebecca and then Isaac that sends him away to Uncle Laban, telling him to find a wife there.

Once there, Laban deceives him into marrying not Rachel, which is his choice, but Leah, which he actually didn't want. And then afterwards, he's forced to work another seven years in order to have her.

And then more again, in order to earn the flocks that he had worked hard for. And then even his wives are the ones who actually decide, did you notice, who he actually gets to sleep with.

[4 : 50] It's like this little ping-pong ball being bounced from one wife to another, and even the maidservants, so that the children that he has are a result of actually their decisions.

And then finally, God is the one that instructs him to go home. The only other time that Jacob makes another choice of his own is when he decides to remain in Canaan, rather than choose to follow Esau down to Seir.

And so if you were Jacob, I don't know, I would feel a bit resentful actually, because I never actually had the chance to decide my own fate. You know, Esau chose to marry Canaanite women.

Why can't I? He gets to build his wealth in Seir. Why can't I do the same? And yet, in the midst of all of this, we have to remember that Jacob is the chosen one.

He's the one that is going to be blessed by God, from whom the Messiah will come, and on whom God's favor rests. And so as we begin chapter 35, God moves Jacob once more.

[6 : 00] Again, not his choice, saying verse 1, Go up to Bethel and settle there, and build an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you were fleeing from your brother Esau. Now to me, the most significant part of this instruction, I think, is to settle there, those two words there.

Jacob is finally settling down at God's appointed place of rest, in Bethel, where he is to build an altar to the God, making it also then a place of worship.

And Bethel, if you recall, is where God actually met him. If you remember, he saw heavens open, and the angels ascending and descending in a ladder from it. This is where God will meet him again, he says, to be in communion with him as he settles there.

And this time, not just him alone, but all his household as well. And to his credit, Jacob's immediate response is to gather his household, verse 2, and all those with him, and say, Get rid of the foreign gods you have with you, and purify yourselves, and change your clothes.

Then come, let us go up to Bethel, where I will build an altar to God, who answered me in the day of my distress, and who has been with me wherever I have gone. So they gave Jacob all the foreign gods they had, and the rings in their ears, and Jacob buried them under the oak at Shechem.

[7 : 20] Then they set out, and the terror of God fell on the towns all around them, so that no one pursued them. Now, you may wonder why all these foreign gods, you know, don't they all just worship the true God?

Well, one of the reasons why that's there could be, for example, remember Rachel stealing her father's household gods? That's, you know, an example of a foreign god, perhaps.

Jacob's servants were probably Arameans, and so they may have had their own gods. And then finally, there are other, remember last week, the wives and children of Shechem, which they plundered last week.

And then we read that they plundered not just the people, but the wealth as well. And so I think the phrase, all will with him, in that verse there, actually refers to these wives and children, and they may have had idols as well in their wealth.

But wherever they came from, Jacob's now asking for everyone to give wholehearted worship to God as they head out to Bethel. And all of them respond positively.

[8 : 25] And so what we see here this week is a much better response from both Jacob and his household compared to what had happened last week. And so they bury their idols beneath the oak, and then they start to make their journey to Bethel.

And God brings his terror upon the locals so as to protect Jacob and his party from any possible retaliation. If you remember, what they'd done was to massacre Shechem.

And so there was always that risk that they might chase and attack them. And when Jacob arrives at Bethel, verse 6, he builds an altar to God and calls it El Bethel, meaning God of Bethel.

And once there, verse 9, God appears again to Jacob and reassures him of his promises to him. First, in verse 10, God reminds Jacob of his new name. He's no longer Jacob, but Israel.

He's no longer the father of just 12 sons, but actually of 12 tribes. Next, in verse 11, God reminds Jacob who he is. I am God Almighty.

[9 : 28] So that Jacob will then know everything else that God says, all his promises, are trustworthy. The first promise is a blessing. God says, be fruitful and increase in number.

And this phrase, this blessing, is actually the same one, the exact same one that was given to Adam and Eve all the way back in Genesis 1. and also the very same one that Noah received after the flood.

So it's almost as though God is saying that Jacob is starting something new here. A new race of people, the Israelites. A new creation, as it were, who are God's chosen people.

And if you realize this, not all of Abraham and Isaac's offspring were actually part of the chosen people. Some were actually not. But from here on in, every offspring of Jacob, in the human sense, is actually part of the chosen race, counted in the covenant.

And that's why God then goes on to say that a nation and a community of nations will come from you, and kings will be among your descendants. And again, they will dwell in the land God promised Abraham and Isaac.

[10 : 42] The land I gave to you, I will give to you. And I will give this land to your descendants after you. Now, none of this is new to Jacob. God repeats them. Why?

Because it's a sign of his care for Jacob. It's rather like how loving parents might treat their children. Most kids love hearing their parents say that they care for them.

And the gifts that come as well are a sign of love, aren't they? And those of us who are parents know how short the useful life of a gift is.

No matter how big the gift is, the effect of it never really lasts very long, is it? You know, we don't buy a big iPhone 10 and then expect that the son or daughter would be happy with it for the next five years.

No other gifts between now and then. No. Because we give one gift and then the next week, you know, kids want another gift. And then they start thinking they're not loved if we don't keep giving gifts.

[11 : 48] But actually, we want to do it, don't we? If we love someone, we keep saying we love them constantly. And we show ways of showing that love by buying, amongst other things, gifts, but also with other things like acts of love.

And so I think this is what is happening here with God and Jacob. God's constantly reminding Jacob of his love for him. In fact, as I was reading through the chapter and you notice these verses, it's actually amazing how many times we're reminded of God's loving actions to Jacob at Bethel.

Every time God and Bethel is being mentioned, we also have a reference of what God has done for him, for Jacob at that place. So verse 1, go to Bethel where God appeared to you while you were fleeing.

Verse 3, Jacob says, I will build an altar to God at Bethel because that's where God answered me in my day of distress. Verse 7, it's at Bethel that God says he's revealed himself to Jacob.

And then in verses 13, 14, and 15, three times no less, it says that Bethel's the place where God talked with Jacob. Again and again, we are reminded of how God shows his love by revealing himself, meeting Jacob in his word to him.

[13 : 09] Bethel, after all, the meaning of that word means house of God. And now finally, what God is saying to Jacob is that you can settle at my house, in the house of God, at Bethel.

And you can do that by worshipping me wholeheartedly, you and your family, and I will reassure you of my presence with my promises. And so it's a wonderful picture, isn't it?

Jacob, who never quite gets much freedom in life, nevertheless, ends up where God wants him to be, in his house, living under his hand and under his blessing.

And that's a similar thing for us as well, except God hasn't called us to settle at Bethel, a physical place. Rather, God has told us to settle in Christ. In John 2, Jesus refers to himself as God's temple or house.

But in our second reading from tonight, John chapter 10, what Jesus does is invite us into God's sheep pen by entering through him, the gate, trusting in him so that we find pasture in God's meadow, as it were.

[14 : 25] Later, Jesus will also say that same passage in John 10, that he's the good shepherd that lays down his life for his sheep. But once we believe in Jesus as our saviour, we enter through that gate.

We are in God's house, we are in God's sheep pen, and Jesus' promise in verse 9 of that passage is that we will come in and go out and find pasture.

That's a really beautiful picture, isn't it? Coming in, going out, and finding pasture. And this is what life's like under God's hand.

This is the promise of his constant care and love, and to know that he'll always be with us, protecting us in our life. Now, in John 10, and verse 10, Jesus expands further on this, saying, I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.

But Jesus also commands us to worship him wholeheartedly. So, do you see there in verse 8, the sheep listen only to Jesus' voice, not to those of the thieves and robbers.

[15 : 38] In other words, we are called to have Jesus as our only God. a bit like Jacob, not have foreign gods as we head to Bethel. And so, my friends, let me ask you, where is your heart and life today?

Are you settled in the house of God? Are you wholeheartedly worshipping Jesus and listening and obeying only his voice? If not, then, can I encourage you to get rid of the idols?

Get rid of the other things that command your affections and worship. And enter through the gate trusting only in Jesus, following him wholeheartedly.

And then, what you will find is you will find rest for your soul as you settle in God's green pasture. Now, if you've already done this, I'm sure many of you have, then I'm sure you also realize that being in God's pasture doesn't mean that life will be rosy hereafter.

You know, the so-called we will live happily ever after. Because if you come back to Genesis chapter 35, the rest of the chapter actually shows us that that's not what happened for Jacob.

[16 : 59] He may have settled at Bethel, but it wasn't happily ever after for him. Rather, he still had his fair share of sorrow as a result of death and sin. In fact, there are three deaths and one incident of sin.

The first death was actually back in verse 8 where Deborah, Rebecca's nurse, we read, died and was buried under the oak outside Bethel. Now, it seems odd, doesn't it, to mention Deborah's, Rebecca's nurse because who is she anyway?

Why mention her? Well, if you think about it, I think the reason is because she's actually Rebecca's nurse. And the fact is that her death is mentioned but not Rebecca's.

And so what we're meant to take out of it is that Jacob actually never got a chance to bury Rebecca. He didn't come back in time from Laban to meet Rebecca at her death and therefore bury her.

So this is actually a double sorrow for Jacob. It's not mentioned there explicitly but because of its silence, we have to take it that Jacob actually was grieving for the very fact that he was Deborah's favorite son, never got a chance to actually see his mom again before she died and to bury her.

[18 : 36] But Deborah also I think would have been a special person to Jacob because we read that Jacob calls the burial place Alon Bakuth which means Oak of Weeping which suggests that actually perhaps she was a surrogate mom to Jacob and so her death brought sorrow to Jacob as well.

The second death in verse 16 brought probably greater grief to Jacob. Rachel, his favorite wife, is with child again so great Rachel finally has another child to add to Joseph and yet this joy turns to sorrow for we read while there was still some distance from Apraph Rachel began to give birth and had great difficulty and as she was having great difficulty in childbirth the midwife said to her don't despair for you have another son but as she breathed her son Benjamin but his father named him Benjamin Benjamin means son of my trouble as you look at the bottom footnotes but Jacob actually renames him Benjamin meaning in other words son of my right hand so this is again another act of favoritism by Jacob but it also shows how much he really loved

Rachel so that's the second death and second instance of sorrow for Jacob and then we have the third death which is Isaac's in verse 27 there we read Jacob came home to his father Isaac in Memre near Kiriath Abba that is Hebron where Abraham and Isaac had stayed Isaac had lived 180 years then he breathed his last and died and was gathered to his people old and full of years and his sons Esau and Jacob buried him this death is significant because it marks the end of a generation no doubt both Jacob and Esau were filled with sorrow as they buried him Esau I think would have had to come all the way down from the south to meet Jacob there to bury their father but there's also one incident of sin and this is in verse 22 where we see Reuben what he does he's Leah's son he goes into

Bilhar who is Rachel's maidservant and sleeps with her after Rachel's death now there's clearly sexual immorality here but I think the real focus is actually on Reuben's power play not in the basketball sense but in terms of usurping the power that was Jacob's you see what happens is that in those days when a son sleeps with his father's wife it was a way of making a claim on succession now for Reuben he's actually the firstborn so you might wonder why he actually needed to do this and I think the reason might be that it was most likely that he was fearful that now that Rachel was dead Jacob would turn his affections to Rachel's maidservant Bilhar as the new favorite as it were and therefore bypassed Leah again and so by defiling Bilhar in this way Reuben was hoping to cut off that possibility now whether that happened or not we don't know

Jacob discovers it but actually he says nothing it is only at his death bed again when he's giving his final blessing that we actually discover his views so on the slide I have chapter 49 in verse 3 and what he does is that he turns again just as he did with Simeon and Levi last week he turns what is supposed to be a blessing into a judgment and so he says Reuben you are my firstborn my might the first sign of my strength excelling in honor excelling in power turbulent as the waters you will no longer excel for you went up onto your father's bed onto my couch and defiled it and so Jacob's view finally is revealed and it's one of condemnation of what Reuben has done now this second half of chapter 35 I think it's been included here just to give us detail about the genealogy to record Jacob's family line as it were but I think it also gives us important context for the next section which will come to next year especially as we learn that

[23 : 11] Benjamin is born and he plays a crucial part in the final part of Genesis when Joseph is in Egypt and yet for us I think it also gives us a glimpse of the ongoing sorrow that Jacob experienced as he faced life in the land of promise while he was under God's blessing we do read that Jacob moved on from Bethel but I don't know whether we need to read too much into it I think he was simply going home en route to bury his father but as the next map shows basically Jacob journeyed in the land and he sort of settled along that spine so from Bethel up in the north down all the way to Hebron Bethlehem which was Ephraim he was right in the heart of the promised land he was right in the heart of God's blessing for him and I guess to draw it to us as well many of us will know that being a

Christian knowing God's blessing in Christ doesn't free us from sorrow either death and sin unfortunately are still present in our lives sometimes that's to our own fault and doing but often it's just because we live in a fallen world and sooner or later death catches up on all of us we will lose loved ones which will cause us great grief add to the fact that being a Christian means we willingly submit to God's will we choose to obey him even though we may see others around us chasing their dreams with great abandon like Esau does whether it's job promotions or love interests or life experiences they are not constrained humanly speaking in the same way that we are and so sometimes I guess as Christians we can feel a bit like Jacob hammed in and want to feel that urge to do something to get out of it just to soothe our anxieties or fears we become a little restless with where

God has put us and wonder whether we might be better off elsewhere no longer under God's as it were restrictive or constraining hand I remember many years ago feeling a bit because the company I worked for had moved the whole department that I was working for to Sydney and even though I still had a job in Melbourne it felt like a dead end job to me because all the prospects had moved to Sydney and I was young then and being restless and not prayerful what I did was I immediately looked for another job and I took the first one that came my way on the first day and realizing that actually I had done the wrong thing I was actually more restless than I was in that previous job and part of me actually wanted to straight away just quit and find another job but somehow and this is only down to

God's grace I managed to restrain myself from doing that and I resolved to stay in that job even though I didn't really like and what God made me realize was that it wasn't the job that was making me restless but it was my failure to trust in him to trust in what God had done for me in Christ and therefore what he would do in my life and so I ended up staying for about two years and there while I was there I learned patience and I learned I came as it were to find peace with where I was even though from the outside it felt like I was just treading water for two years all that time but God was teaching me how to trust in him even though I felt like I needed to do something else to rest in his son rather than you know always just trying to improve my circumstances to get out of the bind that

I found myself in that's actually a very beautiful psalm which picks up on this it's psalm 16 verses 15 to 17 on the screen and it says this Lord you alone are my portion and my cup you make my lot secure the boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places surely I have a delightful inheritance I will praise the Lord who counsels me even at night my heart instructs me often we may feel that where God has placed us is a restriction on our freedom we are hemmed in unable to change our circumstances or perhaps we even know that God wants us to be there in the midst of grief sorrow anxiety fears even though we feel like we need to get out but the psalmist says that the boundary lines God keeping us in the fence line of the sheep pen is there so that God puts us in a beautiful place so that we remain where he wants us so that we can delight in the inheritance that he's given to us for

[28 : 35] Jacob that means settling in Bethel and for us that means resting in God's Christ promises and that's not to say that we should never improve our circumstances but doing it from a sense of restlessness of being tempted to do something when it's clearly against God's will that is rarely helpful that rarely teaches us to trust in God to find peace and rest in where he's put us to and I know how hard that feels sometimes but the best way to actually combat those things is to do again what God does with Jacob to keep coming back to hearing God's voice in his word praying and reminding ourselves over and over again that God is with us that he's going to reveal himself to us he is revealing himself to us in his word that he cares for us in Christ being in Christ is where God wants us to be and so we must resolve to actually just settle there whatever the circumstances may be give him our wholehearted worship while we're there and do so not just with our lips on

Sundays but with our choices and our acts throughout the week as well let's pray Father we thank you that Jesus has laid down his life for us so to lead us to a place of rest in Christ just like you did with Jacob help us to settle and find true rest and security in Jesus help those of us who are struggling finding life to be tough give us the wisdom so that we do not act through lack of faith help us to see that where you put us are pleasant places marked out for our benefit we ask this in Jesus name Amen