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International Messengers

Getting Out Of A Spiritual Slump Genesis 35:1-29

Anyone who follows baseball knows that occasional slumps are part of the game. The New York Mets began their history as notoriously inept. During one especially bad time, Mets manager, Casey Stengel, got a cake for his birthday. Someone asked why Marv Thornberry, their first baseman, hadn't received a cake for his birthday. Stengel quipped, "We were afraid he might drop it."

If you've walked with the Lord for any time at all, you've gone through spiritual slumps, when the Lord seems distant. You hit a plateau where you seem to get stuck. Usually you're not aware of it right away. But at some point, you realize that you aren't as excited about the Lord as you used to be. You're still going through the motions—reading your Bible, praying, serving—but you've lost your first love. It's easy for that to happen after you've been a Christian for many years. Maybe you're burned out from serving. You're always giving out, but not adequately taking in. Slowly the air leaks out of your spiritual tires and you realize that you're in a spiritual slump.

Jacob was there. Thirty years before, the Lord had met Jacob in a special way at Bethel, as he fled from his angry brother, Esau. Jacob made a vow that if God brought him back safely to the land of Canaan, then He would be his God. God kept His part of the deal: Jacob had prospered financially under Laban, in spite of Laban's greed and deception. Jacob had been blessed with eleven sons and a daughter. After wrestling him into submission at Peniel, the Lord had protected him in his dreaded meeting with Esau and brought him safely back to Canaan.

But Jacob stopped short of returning to Bethel, the place of his vow to God. Whether it was continuing fear of Esau, attraction to the good life in Shechem, or other factors, we can't be sure. But Jacob settled short of the place where God wanted him to be. It wasn't that he abandoned God during those ten or so years. He erected an altar there (Gen. 33:20). But even though he went through the outward motions, the reality of Bethel and of Peniel had faded. Jacob went through a decade of spiritual slump which

climaxed in the rape of Dinah and the terrible slaughter of the Shechemites by his sons.

The trick isn't getting into a spiritual slump—most of us have done that without much trouble! The trick is getting out. How do you start growing again? Genesis 35 shows us how Jacob began to grow after his slump. In a nutshell,

We get out of a spiritual slump by
responding obediently to God's Word.

God spoke and Jacob responded obediently. There are four facets to Jacob's obedience which we can apply personally:

1. Obey God's present commands.

Genesis 35:1 ought to encourage anyone in a spiritual slump. After the sordid events of chapter 34, you would have expected the Lord to say, "Jacob, that's it! You and your family have messed up once too often! I chose you to be a blessing to all nations, but instead you deceived and slaughtered them! I'm going to find someone else to be My covenant people!" But instead the Lord graciously says to Jacob, "Arise, go up to Bethel, and live there; and make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau."

That's encouraging! God wants us to come back to Him and grow, even after a decade of spiritual slump, even after a disaster like Genesis 34! Like the father in the parable of the prodigal son, the Lord is looking for His straying children to return to Him, and He always welcomes them back with open arms. His grace should motivate us to respond obediently to Him.

Perhaps you're thinking, "It's great that God spoke to Jacob. But God hasn't spoken to me." Ah, but He has! First bow your heart before Him and confess your spiritual apathy. Then, open your Bible and ask Him to speak to you from His Word and show you what to do. And then do as Jacob did—obey.

One way you'll know that the Lord has spoken to you is that you'll have an immediate sense of *the need for personal and family cleansing*. You'll be aware that there are things you have allowed into your life that have to go, because they are not pleasing to God. As soon as God told Jacob to go back to Bethel, he had to do

some spiritual house cleaning (35:2). God didn't have to tell him to get rid of the idols. Jacob knew that if he was going to meet with God, there had to be cleansing. He couldn't let his family haul their idols to Bethel.

Here is the number one family on the face of the earth, as far as God's dealings go. The Lord has been working with Jacob for over 30 years, and with his father and grandfather before him. And yet here we discover that his family is loaded with idols and ear-rings which had some sort of idolatrous significance (35:4). Rachel had stolen her father's household gods (31:19); the rest of the family apparently had more of their own. Probably they had added a few more when they looted Shechem. Jacob had known about it, but just let it ride until now. But when God told him to return to Bethel, he confronted his family's sin. For the first time we see Jacob taking the proper leadership of his family!

It's easy to sit here and think, "This doesn't apply to me. I don't have any idols—I'm a missionary, not just an ordinary Christian, and certainly not a pagan!" But we're naïve if we assume that Christian workers are not susceptible to idolatry. Idols aren't just little statues you bow down to. An idol is anything that takes the place of God in your life and blocks you from growing in the Lord and doing His will. *Career success* can become an idol, even when that career is Christian ministry. Everything else, even the family, is subordinated to that goal. Some worship *personal fulfillment*. We try to use God to make us happy, or to use ministry to make us happy, rather than to know and serve God out of love for Him, even when it is difficult. For some, the idol is the *pursuit of leisure*. Missionaries can pretty much set their own schedules, and it's easy to get lazy. Sack in, catch a little TV, waste time on things that don't really matter. We end up wasting a lot of the precious time God has entrusted to us.

It's easy to sit here and think, "I hope so-and-so is listening to this! Steve is speaking directly to him." But each of us needs to take the log out of our own eye. The most stubborn idol we have to get rid of is self in all its manifestations. There are three things in the process of rooting out our idols (see vs. 2). First, we must identify and put away anything that hinders our drawing near to God ("Put away your foreign gods"). Second, we must cleanse ourselves, by confessing our sins and appropriating God's forgive-

ness (“purify yourselves”). Third, we must change our outward behavior, which usually involves changing our schedules (“change your garments”). The way to get out of a spiritual slump is, in response to His grace, obey what God is telling you to do right now.

2. Fulfill your past commitments.

God had begun with Jacob 30 years before at Bethel, where he had made some commitments to the Lord. They were immature commitments in many ways, because Jacob was bargaining with God, and no sinner should do that. Jacob had promised God that if He would provide for him and bring him back safely, he would let God be his God, he would set up Bethel as God’s house and give a tenth to God. Although immature, God took Jacob’s commitments and began to work with him. He wanted Jacob’s obedience and worship. So here, the Lord doesn’t mention the house or the ten percent. He commands Jacob to return to Bethel and fulfill his commitment to worship. Jacob had to return to his original commitment to the Lord.

God has a way of bringing us back to commitments we made to Him years before. That’s why it’s good to encourage your children to commit themselves to the Lord, even if they don’t understand much. I “invited Jesus to come into my heart” when I was three. I didn’t understand total depravity or substitutionary atonement. But I believe the Lord was at work in my heart. When I was in grade school, I remember responding when an evangelist at church asked those who wanted to be sure about going to heaven to raise their hand. In fourth and fifth grades, I went to a church camp in Crestline, California. I don’t remember anything any speaker said. All I remember is getting into nettle playing by the creek, having a crush on a couple of girls and on one of the girl counselors, choosing Philippians 4:13 as my life verse, and throwing a stick on the fire signifying dedicating my life to the Lord. Little did I know that God would bring me back to that same community to pastor a church for 15 years!

Most of us made commitments to the Lord early in our relationship with Him. Maybe it was at camp or at a church service. We had a zeal and joy in knowing and serving the Savior in those early days. It’s good to dust off those commitments once in a while and go back spiritually to the place where God met you then.

You have to do that in marriage once in a while, don't you? It's wonderful when you first fall in love! Remember how you felt toward each other? Remember that romantic moment when she told you she'd marry you? That was wonderful, but there isn't anybody who maintains those intense feelings through the years of marriage. Sometimes, when marriage has grown a bit stale, it's good to go back, either in your mind, or perhaps, even as a couple to the very spot, and renew those early commitments.

It's the same spiritually. You've got to rekindle the romance you used to have with God. Get alone with Him and tell Him that you love Him. Clean out the junk in your life that has gotten you off track. Think about the things you've promised to do for Him. And recommit yourself to do them now, by His grace. That leads to the third factor in shaking off a spiritual slump:

3. Remember God's past and continuing compassion.

Much of this chapter focuses on God's past and continuing mercies to Jacob. God's past mercy in protecting him from Esau is mentioned three times (35:1, 3, 7). The Lord mercifully protected Jacob's family from vengeance for slaughtering the Shechemites by sending "a terror" on the Canaanites (35:5). When the Lord appears to Jacob again at Bethel, He doesn't say much new, except that kings shall come forth from him (35:11). Everything else has been revealed before. The Lord reconfirms Jacob's new name (35:10). He reveals to Jacob His name "El Shaddai;" but that wasn't new; Abraham and Isaac had known God by that name (17:1; 28:3). It means, "God Almighty," and pointed Jacob toward the fact that God was sufficient for all his needs.

The Lord goes on to remind Jacob that He will keep the promises He gave years before: To multiply Jacob's descendants and give them the land. After God leaves, Jacob does the same thing he did 30 years before: He sets up a pillar and pours out an offering on it. Even the list of Jacob's twelve sons (35:23-26) fits the context here as a reminder of God's covenant faithfulness. As the heads of the future twelve tribes of the nation, they are like the down payment of God's promises. As Jacob knelt before God at Bethel, this time not alone, but with a great company, how could he help but thank God for His abundant compassion?

Sometimes we think that to get out of a spiritual slump we've got to discover some new spiritual truths. That is seldom the case. Usually all we need is to be reminded of the old truths we already know. We need to remember God's past and continuing mercies toward us in Christ. We need to recall that in spite of our sin and spiritual dullness, the Lord is faithful, that "He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:6).

That's one reason frequent observance of the Lord's Supper is so important. I hear Christians say, "It becomes too commonplace and loses its meaning to do so often." I'll grant that any spiritual discipline can become commonplace and lose its significance if we let it. Daily prayer and Bible reading aren't always exciting. Going to church every week can get old. But we need frequent reminders of the simple truth of God's mercy toward us in Christ. Paul's motivation to live for Christ was the fact that the Son of God loved him and delivered Himself up for him (Gal. 2:20).

So to get out of a spiritual slump, we need to obey God's present commands, fulfill our past commitments, and remember God's continuing compassion. There's a fourth element:

4. Trust God with your present concerns.

God had spoken to Jacob ten years before at Peniel, but not since, as far as the text reveals. During that time, Jacob had become comfortable in his partial obedience in Shechem. Then the tragedies of Dinah's rape and his sons' bloody revenge shook Jacob out of his complacency. Suddenly, he was ready to listen and God spoke again. In verse 1, the Lord brings to Jacob's mind how He had appeared to him when he fled from Esau. In verse 3, Jacob refers to that time as the day of his distress. It often takes a day of distress to get our attention so that we'll snap out of our spiritual slump.

But then we mistakenly think that since we've turned the corner and now we're obeying God that He will give us (or even owes us) a trouble-free life. But obedience to God doesn't mean that He will reward us with a life free from trials. It's often the trials that keep us clinging to Him so that we don't fall back into another slump. It's significant that in this chapter which records Jacob's spiritual recovery, there are no less than four tragedies which bring sorrow into Jacob's life.

The first is the death of Deborah, Rebekah's nurse (35:8). She was only mentioned before (not by name) when she left Haran with Rebekah, who was going to marry Isaac (24:59). If she had cared for Rebekah as an infant, she would be very old by now, probably about 170. It is not revealed when she joined Jacob's company, but her presence probably indicates that Rebekah had died sometime during Jacob's years in Haran. As close as he was to his mother, the death of her beloved nurse would have been tough for Jacob. The name given to Deborah's burial place, "The Oak of Weeping," shows his grief.

The second sorrow to hit Jacob was the greatest of his life: his beloved Rachel died in childbirth (35:16-20). (Jacob's journey from Bethel toward Hebron was probably not a violation of God's command in 35:1, which meant, "Stay at Bethel long enough to fulfill your vows." See also the command in 31:3.) Jacob had loved Rachel at first sight. He had worked seven years for her and then, when he got cheated with Leah, he worked seven more for Rachel. Although his grief is passed over in Genesis 35, it is revealed about 40 years later, when Jacob on his deathbed poignantly recalls, "... when I came from Paddan, Rachel died, to my sorrow, in the land of Canaan on the journey, ... and I buried her there on the way to Ephrath" (Gen. 48:7).

Jacob's third sorrow is mentioned on the heels of Rachel's death: Reuben, his firstborn son, committed incest with Rachel's maid, Bilhah, Jacob's concubine. This was probably Reuben's attempt to grab the family inheritance for himself, much as Absalom in his rebellion publicly went in to David's concubines, and Adonijah later attempted to usurp power from his brother, Solomon, with the same scheme. Reuben's crass sin must have stung Jacob deeply (Gen. 49:4).

Jacob's final sorrow in this chapter is the death of his aged father, Isaac. A casual reading might make us think that Jacob arrived just before Isaac's death. But from other chronological notices in Genesis, we learn that Jacob lived in Hebron with Isaac about twelve years before Isaac died. But Isaac's death is presented here to wrap up this part of Jacob's history. It was another sorrow for Jacob, as another link with the past was removed.

While the text doesn't develop it in each situation, there are hints that Jacob bore these trials with renewed trust in God. His renaming Benjamin in spite of Rachel's death seems to have been an act of faith. She had named him Benoni, "son of my sorrow," but through his tears Jacob named him "son of my right hand." There are two pillars in this chapter, the first at Bethel where he poured out his offering (35:14), the second at Rachel's grave (35:20). They seem to be linked as monuments of growth, the first signifying Jacob's thankfulness for God's faithfulness, the second his faith in God's promise in spite of his loss. Jacob's faith may be hinted at when the text says, "Then Israel journeyed on" (35:21), using his new name of strength. At first glance I would have labeled Jacob's silence in response to Reuben's sin as another example of his passivity. But again the text states, "and Israel heard" (35:22). This seems to hint that he handled this shocking news in his new strength with God. He waited until the final blessings on his sons to deal with it (49:3-4); but then he did deal with it by depriving Reuben of his birthright.

The point is that coming out of a spiritual slump doesn't guarantee that life ahead will be rosy. Obedience doesn't mean a trouble-free life. But in the inevitable trials God uses to shake us out of spiritual indifference and to keep us trusting Him, we have the God of Jacob as "our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (Ps. 46:1, 7, 11). It is significant that in chapter 34, with all its sin, God is not mentioned at all. But in chapter 35, God's name appears 11 times, plus 12 more times in the names Israel, Bethel, El-Bethel, and El-Shaddai (James Boice, *Genesis* [Zondervan], 2:348). Trials can either make us self-focused or God-focused. If we allow the trials to help us put God back in the rightful center of our lives, we will recover from a spiritual slump, as Jacob did.

Conclusion

There is an old rabbinical legend about a man named Simon who lived in Krakow, Poland. Simon repeatedly had a vivid dream in which there was a great treasure buried under a bridge in Prague, many miles away. Being a poor man, he finally decided to make the long trip to Prague to search for this treasure. When he arrived and went to the bridge, a sentry saw him probing around and demanded to know what he was doing. Simon told the sentry about his dreams and his long journey from Krakow.

"You foolish man," the sentry replied. "Don't you know that you can't believe your dreams? Why I've dreamed many times about a man in Krakow named Simon who has a treasure buried under his kitchen stove, but I've never been so dumb as to go to Krakow in search of it. Now get along!"

So Simon returned to Krakow, looked under his kitchen stove, and discovered a treasure which enabled him to live comfortably for the rest of his life. The rabbis always ended the story by saying: The treasure was always in Krakow, but the knowledge of it was in Prague.

Sometimes the very thing we're looking for is right under our noses, but we've got to go the long, hard way around to discover it. God's place of blessing for Jacob was in Bethel, but he had to go to Haran for twenty hard years and spend another ten in Shechem before he came back to Bethel. Some would say that those were all wasted years. Were they? In one sense, yes, in that if Jacob had learned to trust and obey the Lord sooner, those years could have been avoided or shortened. But in another sense, they were necessary in the process of shaping Jacob.

We have all of God's treasures in Jesus Christ and in the written Word which reveals Him. He is El Shaddai, the All-Sufficient One. Sometimes God uses a spiritual slump to make us wake up to the riches that have been right under our noses all the time. If you've been in a slump, shake it off by responding obediently to God's Word.