

## Abounding Grace Genesis 35:16-29

*It's a Wonderful Life* is one of my all-time favorite Christmas movies starring Jimmy Stewart as George Bailey. His whimsical but forgetful Uncle Billy has a minor role in the story, yet his actions play a major part in the plot of the movie. Something we notice about Uncle Billy in each scene in which he appears is that he has a string tied around any number of fingers. Their purpose is to remind him of something he is supposed to do, which in the end he doesn't even with the reminder. In one scene George tells him he can remove one string, because it was supposed to remind him to attend George's wedding, which he missed. One string brings us to the crux of the movie where he was to deposit money in the bank, a day the bank examiner showed up to check the books, only to prove that the string didn't help him remember what he had done with the money.

Some believe that the practice of tying a string around the finger as a way of remembering began with the Anglo-Saxons. They believed that tying a string around one's finger kept an idea from escaping, in effect, tying the idea to one's self.

Truth be told, it began much earlier than that. While we can't be sure about its origins, we do know that it was a practice in Old Testament times. For example, we read in **Proverbs 7:2-3** "**Keep My commandments and live; guard My instructions like the pupil of your eye. Tie them around your fingers; write them on the tablet of your heart.**"

In **Deuteronomy 6:5-6** God told the Israelites to take His commandments and tie them on the back of their hand or on their foreheads. The men wore what is called a phylactery. It's a small leather box with straps for tying to the hand, arm or forehead. Inside was a piece of paper on which was written various commands they were to remember. In this way God's commandments would always be in front of them so they wouldn't forget it.

As we come to our text today in **Genesis 35:16-29**, there is such a verse that, while it isn't part of our

passage, it is a verse that I don't want you to forget because it is imbedded in the passage. This verse is one that you should cling to. It's a verse of hope for sin – past, present, and future. It's a simple verse packed with meaning, freedom, and encouragement. Take a moment to underline it in your Bible and then inscribe it on your heart. Never forget it. Remind yourself of it daily.

While it's found in the New Testament, this verse is clearly evident throughout the Bible and we see it evident in the life of Jacob. From the Apostle Paul's pen writing under the direction of the Holy Spirit we are reminded in **Romans 5:20**, that "**Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.**"

**NIV – "Where sin increased, grace increased all the more."**

**The Amplified Bible – "But where sin increased and abounded, grace (God's unmerited favor) has surpassed it and increased the more and super abounded."**

Simply stated, no matter what sin we commit, even the most heinous of acts, God's grace, His unmerited favor toward us, is greater than our sin. Or, there is no sin that God's grace to forgive can't overflow with the covering of Christ's shed blood. **Walvoord and Zuck write "No matter how great human sin becomes, God's grace overflows beyond it and abundantly exceeds it."**

That is exactly what we have seen in the life of Jacob and is the same for the believer. No matter what the sin and no matter how many times we sin, God's grace overflows above it to cover us.

In our message last week, we saw a renewed call by God to Jacob to return to where he had his first real encounter with God, the place where his spiritual journey began. Before he could return Jacob had to deal with some things – remove idols, repent of sin, and rekindle his faith.

We also saw last week that God was incrementally removing his past preparing him for what was ahead. We are reminded from **II Corinthians 5:17** that when we become a child of God through faith

in Christ we have become a new creation and the old has passed. When we yield to God's work in us, it can be a slow process. Some changes may be immediate. Others may be over time. But the more we follow God, the more of our past He removes. In **verses 16-29** God removes more of Jacob's past. In **verses 1-15** there was death to self and then death to his mother's nurse, Deborah. Before God can begin to work in other areas of our life we need to first die to self and our will and then begin to obey His will.

Let's take a closer look at the remainder of this chapter to see how the skillful hands of our spiritual surgeon is working in Jacob.

There is first a painful death.

### I. A PAINFUL DEATH – vs. 16-20

Sometimes the very things we love the most, even though they are good things, are the very things that God may have to remove if they keep us from fully or completely serving Him. Even a marriage partner can become an idol if that person takes the place of God.

Journey back with me in Jacob's life for a moment. Back in **chapter 27** Jacob had deceived his father Isaac into giving him the blessing, which was a big deal in that culture. You received the rights of the family inheritance. Jacob swindled his twin brother whom Isaac was planning to give the blessing to. In a furious rant, Esau planned on killing Jacob. When dear old mom heard about it, she sent Jacob away to live with her brother Laban till things with his sibling cooled down. When he arrived in Paddan Aram, it was his cousin Rachel he met first and he was smitten with her. After being there about a month he told Uncle Laban that he would do anything for her hand in marriage and struck a deal to work seven years for her. Even though the value of the work he did for free just to marry Rachel far exceeded a dowry, her value to him was worth every minute of labor, that's how much he loved her. We even read that after Laban cheated him by giving Jacob her older sister Leah first that Jacob worked an additional seven years for Rachel, a total of 14 years.

Listen to this account of starry-eyed love.

**Genesis 29:20** “Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her.”

Jacob was willing to do anything for the sake of his love. Maybe this is what inspired Elizabeth Barrett Browning to write her epic poem.

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.  
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height  
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight  
For the ends of being and ideal grace.  
I love thee to the level of every day's  
Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.  
I love thee freely, as men strive for right.  
I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.  
I love thee with the passion put to use  
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.  
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose  
With my lost saints. I love thee with the breath,  
Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose,  
I shall but love thee better after death.

As sweet Wesley kissed Princess Buttercup in the end of *The Princess Bride*, the author closes with this: “Since the invention of the kiss, there have only been five kisses that were rated the most passionate, the most pure. This one left them all behind.”

That was Jacob's love for Rachel even all these years later, as they leave Bethel, where they had gathered to worship God, and begin a journey to Ephrath. In **verse 16** there is a move to Bethlehem.

### A. The Move To Bethlehem – v. 16a

We aren't sure why Jacob made another move, why they left Bethel. We aren't told whether this was God's plan or his. We are left to wonder, but move they did. They headed to a little town called Ephrath. We know it by another name and sing about it in one of our Christmas hymns. Its significance is evident in a Messianic passage that gives us the birthplace of the Messiah. “Oh little town of Bethlehem how still we see thee lie.”

**Micah 5:2** “But you, Bethlehem, Ephrethah, though you are small among the clans of Judah,

**out of you will come for Me One who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”**

Ephrath means fruitful.

Bethlehem means house of bread.

Think about that for a moment because from this obscure little village would come the Messiah, Jesus Christ, who stated that He was the Bread of life (**John 6:35**) and that if we abide in Him we would bear much fruit (**John 15:5**). Eternal life is only available through Him. **Have you tasted of this Bread, by placing your faith in Him, the One whose body would be broken and whose blood would be shed for us so that we could have eternal life?**

Jacob and his family were making a move to Bethlehem. And it is on the way that we see the miracle of birth in **verses 16 and 17**.

### **B. The Miracle of Birth – vs. 16b-17**

I can only go on what I have heard having never experienced it myself, but they, referring to women who have given birth and who are the experts on the subject, say that having a child is painful. I won't entertain the notion that I have even the faintest idea of what it must be like and from all accounts I don't want to.

From what we read in the passage, both Rachel and Jacob must have agreed that she was well enough to travel the approximate 15 miles, even though she was near the time of giving birth. But for some unknown reason, the text describes her labor in childbirth as being extremely difficult, but a miracle none the less.

**Having watched David being born, I can only say that birth is truly a miracle. Just thinking about that little person all balled up inside the mom as he or she develops can only be described as amazing. They come out all wrinkly and immediately the little bundle of joy is swept away to get cleaned up and cared for by a nurse while another nurse assists the doctor in taking care of the mother.**

The mid-wife attending Rachel told her not to be afraid because she had given birth to a son. **When**

**David was born, the doctor looked at Robyn and said with pride “you have a little man-cub.”** With that the lyrics of Alan Jackson sweep over me.  
**Precious memories how they linger  
 How they ever flood my soul  
 In the stillness, of the midnight  
 Precious sacred scenes unfold**

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The words **“another son”** are significant. After Leah had given birth to four sons, Rachel in bitterness, seeing that she was barren, demanded that Jacob give her children or she would die (**Genesis 30:1**). It wasn't until some time later that we read God remembered Rachel and opened up her womb so that she could conceive (**Genesis 30:24**). She named him Joseph and stated **“May the Lord add to me another son.”** The name Joseph means adding, implying the hope that God would give her another boy. This birth fulfilled the expectation of her prayer. It is in the miracle of birth that we see the message in Benjamin.

### **C. The Message In Benjamin – v. 18**

Names were meaningful in Bible times. You were given a name to remind you of something. Jacob meant ‘one who grabs the heel’ and would be associated with his deceptive nature. That's why the Lord changed his name to Israel, ‘one who wrestles with God’. Names were important because they were are part of your identity, your character, your nature. When Naomi returned having lost her husband and two sons, she told her friends to call her Mara, which means bitterness.

With her dying breath, Rachel named him Ben-Oni. It meant ‘son of my trouble’ or ‘son of my sorrow’. Every time someone called his name it would be a reminder that his death caused his mother pain and death. Here's the literal meaning – ‘you're a pain’. **How would you like to have a name like that?** Every time your name was called would remind you of the trouble you caused.  
 ‘You're a pain, come here.’  
 ‘You're a pain, clean your room.’  
 ‘You're a pain, wait till your father comes home.’

My Dad wanted his firstborn son to be named after him, but Mom didn't want me to take his middle name, Everett. Now there isn't anything wrong with the name Everett, I know several with that name, but she didn't want to holler "Howard Everett out the back door for a 5 year old that it was time to come in." So I was given the middle name of Paul. But here's the thing, it didn't matter what middle name I was given, if she used my middle name, I was in trouble anyway. How many know what I'm talking about?

Rachel gave her son the name Ben-Oni, son of my trouble, because as we learn from the passage that she was dying.

But Jacob had a different idea, in spite of the pain Rachel was experiencing in birthing her son, he chose a different name, one that would honor the child instead of always being a reminder of her struggle. He gave him the name Benjamin. It has two meanings. One that is less significant than the other. It can mean 'son of the south'. His 11 brothers were all born in the north, in Padan Aram. Benjamin was born in the south, in the land of Canaan, in the Promised Land.

But more importantly, the name means 'son of my right hand' or 'son to be honored'. Being at someone's right hand was a place of honor. That would literally become true. Israel's first king came from the tribe of Benjamin (**I Samuel 9:1**). As he was recalling his status among the Jews, the Apostle Paul noted that he was a Benjamite (**Philippians 3:5**).

There was a message in Benjamin's name that would remind Jacob of the honor of his birth and the honor that would come through his lineage.

The name was important, yet in giving him life, Rachel would lose her own. The miracle of birth and the message in Benjamin is met with the misery of bereavement.

#### **D. The Misery Of Bereavement – vs. 19-20**

**"So Rachel died."**

It doesn't matter the age or the circumstances or the gender or one's social status. It doesn't even matter what miracles of modern medicine are available. Death is no respecter of persons. It is difficult. It hurts. Especially troubling in this time of the virus are those who have passed away, isolated from loved being around them. Death is a sobering reminder of the curse given to Adam that disobedience would result in death. Death is the consequence of sin. Some scholars suggest that Rachel's death was a result of stealing her father's idols. I'm not so sure. I'm not going to be so bold to make such a statement. The only thing we know for sure is that Rachel, the absolute love of Jacob's life died and was buried somewhere along the way to Bethlehem. The sting of death produces misery that lasts a long time. To mark the occasion and the location, Jacob put up a monument, a pillar to mark the burial spot. I'd like to think that he visited it from time to time.

**It is coming up on 10 years since my Mom died. She made the best sticky buns. Every year on her birthday, my brother takes a little plate out to her gravesite with a sticky bun on it, sings happy birthday to her and sheds some tears. No matter how many years ago since she passed away, it's still painful.** It was painful for Jacob.

And so Jacob continued his journey and pitched his tent near Migdal Eber. It means 'tower of the flock' or simply watchtower, indicating that where they settled had a great place to pasture his sheep. But, as with his other move, this one also met with some serious problems.

Where there was a painful death in **verses 16-20**, we see a purposeful defilement in **verses 21-26**.

#### **II. A PURPOSEFUL DEFILEMENT – vs. 21-26**

The sin mentioned here is one that Paul addressed to the church in Corinth. We read about it in his first letter.

**I Corinthians 5:1 "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife."**

It was an egregious sin, and it's what happened in our text. Reuben, who was the oldest son of Leah, had an illicit affair with his father's wife, Bilhah. We see in **verses 21-22** a lustful deed.

### A. A Lustful Deed – vs. 21-22

Bilhah was Rachel's maid given by Rachel to Jacob as a wife to bear children because she was still barren. What Reuben did had significance. He was Jacob's firstborn and heir to the estate. It's possible that after Rachel's death she longed to take Rachel's place as Jacob's favorite wife, and so it's possible that Jacob still in grief wasn't in the mood to replace his favorite wife. So maybe spurned love looked elsewhere. Since the text doesn't say that he violated her as we saw happen to Dinah in the previous chapter, we assume that this act was mutual. So this could have been a sin of passion. But more likely, as we will see, it was a sin of purpose.

It may have appeared to Reuben that dad favored Rachel's children over his mother Leah's children. We'll see that when we get to Joseph being sold into slavery. Maybe Reuben thought that Bilhah would now become his father's favored wife over his mother, Leah. So, while passion seems to be a secondary motive, the real purpose is that the act of incest was a claim on the inheritance. A Near-Eastern custom held that the possession of the father's concubines validated his succession and right to the inheritance. Reuben attempted to ensure his right to the inheritance. When we come to the end of Genesis we'll see that his actions resulted in losing what he wanted most.

Warren Wiersbe provides some perspective for us on what Reuben did. "Reuben's sin involved much more than the satisfying of a lustful appetite. For a son to take a father's wife in this manner was a declaration that he was now the head of the family."

When Abner took King Saul's concubine, Saul's son and heir, Ishbosheth protested because it meant Abner was usurping the crown (**II Samuel 3:6-11**). When David's son Absalom took his father's

concubines, the act was a claim on succession of the crown (**II Samuel 16:21-22**).

When David's son Adonijah asked Queen Bathsheba for Abishag as his wife, one of David's other wives, he was asking for the crown over Solomon (**I Kings 2:17-22**).

Reuben wanted the inheritance through a lust for power. It was a lustful deed.

To show us Reuben's position the author provides a look at descendants.

### B. A Look At Descendants – vs. 23-26

We get a clue from John Phillip's why the lineage is provided for us here. He writes: "The purpose is to draw special attention to Reuben's position in the family and to underline the consequent responsibility that he so lightly despised."

Apparently he either couldn't wait and wanted to usurp his right as heir by sleeping with his father's concubine or he didn't really consider the consequences for his actions. If he had only been patient, the inheritance would have been his by right of his position as firstborn. He viewed the situation with his father's wives as jeopardizing his inheritance and took matters into his own hands. He viewed his other half-brothers, especially the sons of Rachel and Bilhah as a threat against what he might lose. He didn't trust his father and he certainly wasn't trusting God. Two passages show us that his impatient rashness backfired. Just before Jacob died, he blessed each of his children, but in the blessing he gave the birthright privileges to Joseph (**Genesis 49:3-4**). **I Chronicles 5:1** says that the reason was because he defiled his father's marriage bed. It was a purposeful defilement.

And so we come to the close of this passage in **verses 27-29** where we note a pleasant departure.

### III. A PLEASANT DEPARTURE – vs. 27-29

This chapter has been filled with death, some of it good. Most of it not.

Jacob died to self – that's good, because it's only

when we die to self that we can fully walk by faith and be obedient.

His mother's nurse, Deborah, died.

His wife Rachel died.

For practical purposes after Reuben slept with Bilhah, Jacob lost her as a wife.

And now we see one final death. It's his father Isaac. In **verse 27** there is a final visit.

### A. A Final Visit – v. 27

It is great to see a family who has been at odds come together in the end. What had happened some 30 or so years earlier could have been the proverbial elephant in the room. But time and God's work in hearts mended broken down fences. When I read in this passage that **"Jacob came home to his father, Isaac"**, it means more to me than just having a visit. It says to me that whatever implied attitudes there were in the past had been resolved. Coming home means to me that he was welcomed with open arms.

Maybe you know the pain of a family dynamic that has been strained from something in the past and you long for reconciliation to happen. Let this passage encourage you to rest confidently in God's grace to work in hearts to bring about change so that your loved one can **"come home"**. Maybe you are the one who did the leaving. Maybe you are the one who needs to have the work of God in your heart so that peace can once again be restored. As it was in Jacob's situation, you don't know how long a loved one will have before they are taken. Make the effort and do it today. Take the trip and go home.

And so it is that death closes out the chapter. Decades earlier, Isaac thought he was going to die (**Genesis 27:2-4**) and now he has. Here is a final venture.

### B. A Final Venture – vs. 28-29

Isaac is now **"180 years old and he breathed his last and was gathered to his people."** Of the patriarchs, Isaac lived the longest, yet he has the least written about him. After his passing, his two sons come together once more to bury him.

Warren Wiersbe states that **"Death is a human experience that brings human pain to our hearts, and caring for the dead is a responsibility for all the family – believers and unbelievers."**

A chaplain once shared that after a funeral service three daughters bickered over who would get a ring that had belonged to the mother. Their father took the ring and buried with his wife.

We don't read of any bickering over the inheritance after the burial. They met as brothers who had reconciled with each other some years earlier. They were different in every respect, yet they were united in their grief over their father. Isaac's death changed Jacob's status. He was now the head of the family and heir of the covenant promises.

The last tie of Jacob is severed and he must now completely depend on God as it should be.

But there is one more point I want to make about Isaac before we close. The passages says that he was **"old and full of years"**. When I read that the words of the Apostle Paul come to mind. They are the words I hope can be said about me when I draw my last breath. **II Timothy 4:7 "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for His appearing."**

I hope that's your desire, to be full of years and to have fought a good fight for Christ and kept the faith as you have eagerly waited for Christ. I hope you have seen the hand of God's grace on you.

As I said at the beginning, this chapter and certainly the life of Jacob is splattered with God's grace. Jacob has begun to walk with the Lord, but even this chapter is a reminder that just because a person is following God in obedience, that person's life can still experience heartache and pain. There are still trials along the way. Jacob was learning to obey God not for what he could get out of it, but because God was worthy.

Kent Hughes adds to that thought “Jacob’s life calls us to repent of our sin and obey God’s call and direction in our lives. That patriarch’s life assures us of the triumph of grace.”

Let me close by saying that where the effects of sin may long endure in the life of the repentant believer, the overarching theme of grace is always evident. God’s grace is always sufficient because **“Where sin abounds, grace super abounds.”**

That’s why communion is so special to me. It reminds me of the grace of God necessary to provide me with salvation.

It’s a time of **introspection** as we ponder where we stand with God in considering the sacrifice Christ made for us to pay our debt for sin.

It’s a time of **repentance** by confessing known sin so that we are worthy to take communion. Paul says that we should examine our lives.

**When we go for an examination at the doctor’s office, he will reveal anything that isn’t right.**

Our time of **examination** allows the Great Physician to reveal sin that we might confess it and restore a broken relationship caused by that sin.

It’s a time of **expression** as we then give God thanks for loving us so much that He sent His Son to die for us so that in believing on Him by faith we might not perish but have everlasting life.

Hymn – *There’s Something About That Name*

**I Corinthians 11:23-29**