

# A Divided Church for Future Glory

Genesis 35:21-26

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## Introduction:

In our sermon series from the book of Genesis,

- we are presently looking at transitional chapters between the *to-le-doth* of Isaac and the *to-le-doth* of Jacob.
  - *To-le-doth* is the Hebrew word that means *generations* or *genealogy*.
  - All through Genesis this word *to-le-doth* is used to present a new generation:
    - For example, in Genesis 2:4 we have the *to-le-doth* of the heavens and the earth.
    - And in Genesis 5:1, we have the *to-le-doth* of Adam and then it tells us about his sons and what they did.
    - And in Genesis 6:9, we have the *to-le-doth* of Noah
    - And in Genesis 10:1, we have the *to-le-doth* of the sons of Noah.
    - And then in Genesis 11:27, we have the *to-le-doth* of Terah, Abraham's father after which follows the lengthy account of Abraham.
  - The *to-le-doth* that we are in now that is wrapped up in Genesis 35 is the *to-le-doth* of Isaac which was announced in Genesis 25:19.
    - After it follows the history of Jacob and Esau, the sons of Isaac.
  - In chapter 36, we will have the brief *to-le-doth* of Esau which will show the history of his sons, and then follows the next great section...
    - In Genesis 37:2 we are introduced to the *to-le-doth* of Jacob, and from here to the end of Genesis we will be reading about his twelve sons.
- So in Genesis 35, where we are now, the *to-le-doth* of Isaac is being wrapped up and the stage is being set for the *to-le-doth* of Jacob.
  - I have already shown you in chapter 35 that there are four ways that the Lord is preparing for the next generation of His people.
    - Two weeks ago, we saw in Genesis 35:1-15 how the LORD called Jacob, after a time of declension, to return to Bethel (the house of God),
      - and how Jacob was led to repentance and renewed hope in God's promises and how he led his household.
      - It was a necessary preparation if they were to go on as God's people and not be either wiped out by or entirely absorbed into Canaanite culture.
    - And then last week, we saw the second preparation...
      - how the LORD brought Jacob to further repentance by purging him of an idol he had made in his own life...
      - We saw how Rachel, the wife he loved most, was taken from him in giving birth to her second son...
      - We saw how Jacob looked to God in that painful tearing away of this idol from his life with hope, looking at the son as a son of the right hand (*Benjamin*) rather than a son of sorrow (*Ben-Oni*).
      - God was doing this to prepare Jacob to lead his twelve sons as the people of God as the patriarch.

- And now, this week, we are going to look at the third preparation...a very different kind of preparation that God brings about for the future generation...
  - There is the completion of Jacob's family with the birth of his twelfth son,
    - but there is also what we might call the setting of the stage with terrible divisions for the future.
    - It is out of terrible divisions in Jacob's house that the most valuable lessons of all are to be learned!
      - This shouldn't be a completely alien idea to us—for we saw how division between Jacob and Esau was the context out of which valuable lessons were taught to Jacob (and to the whole church who reads this account)...
      - But there is one important difference, and that is that with Jacob and Esau, the division was between Jacob who was to continue in God's kingdom and Esau who was to be cut off...
      - Where with Jacob's sons the division is between sons who are all heirs of salvation, all the elect of God who will inherit the kingdom of righteousness!
    - So with them, we are not talking about the divisions in the church between the chosen seed and the reprobate...
      - but we are talking about division among true sons of God!
        - Divisions in the church or the redeemed who were chosen in Christ from before the foundation of the world to be with Him in glory.
        - This teaches us that there will be divisions in the church between true believers...
          - which there have been all through the history of the church.
        - This is helpful because it makes it clear to us that such divisions are to be expected and that we must not be too quick to write off as unbelievers those with whom we are divided.
- And next week, we will see the fourth way that God sets things up for the next generation—with the death of Isaac and with the ongoing unity of Jacob Esau.

Let us now turn to our scripture reading in Genesis 35:21-26.

Please give me your attention as I read to you from Genesis 35 beginning in v.21.

- This is the Word of God.

**Gen 35:21-26:** Then Israel journeyed and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder. <sup>22</sup> And it happened, when Israel dwelt in that land, that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine; and Israel heard *about it*. Now the sons of Jacob were twelve: <sup>23</sup> the sons of Leah *were* Reuben, Jacob's firstborn, and Simeon, Levi, Judah,

Issachar, and Zebulun; <sup>24</sup> the sons of Rachel *were* Joseph and Benjamin; <sup>25</sup> the sons of Bilhah, Rachel's maidservant, *were* Dan and Naphtali; <sup>26</sup> and the sons of Zilpah, Leah's maidservant, *were* Gad and Asher. These *were* the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Padan Aram.

May the LORD bless the reading of His holy Word.

In learning from this passage we will begin by looking at how...

## I. Division in the church is a shameful thing.

A. Here we see Jacob's house divided.

1. We have seen all along how Jacob's sin produced division in his home.
  - a. First, that he had taken four women to be his wives.
    - What a recipe for disaster that was!
      - A lot of men do this today—not quite in the same way...
        - but they marry and then divorce and marry again and end up with different children in different houses.
        - Or even worse, they don't bother with marriage at all and move from one woman to another like a dog in the neighbourhood.
    - In Jacob's case, he did this in the first place because he did not want to risk losing Rachel
      - (which he might have if he had refused to marry her sister first),
      - and then he took Rachel and then Leah's handmaids as wives because he did not want the trouble they would have given him if he had refused.
  - b. But to make matters even worse, Jacob then showed extreme favouritism to Rachel, his favourite wife!
    - He treated his other wives and their sons like servants, so there was a lot of resentment toward Rachel's sons from the other sons.
      - It was Jacob's fault—
    - And it was especially troubling to Reuben because he was Jacob's firstborn who was entitled to the leadership of the family and a double portion of the inheritance...
      - The way Jacob was acting, he was pretty sure that this right would be given to Joseph instead of him.
2. And so now at Rachel's death, Reuben makes a power play!
  - a. His wicked deed is recorded in verse 22: **And it happened, when Israel dwelt in that land, that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine; and Israel heard about it.**
    - This was a very wicked thing for him to do—to take his father's wife—it was a wickedness that even the pagan cultures recoiled from...
      - And here is Reuben, a circumcised son of the kingdom of heaven and the firstborn son of Israel!
      - Be humble, dear brothers and sisters—you are capable of sins that are just as great—you stand by grace—walk carefully with your God.
  - b. But Reuben's deed was very likely more than an act of sexual lust.
    - In those days, if someone wanted to claim the place of a man, it was customary to have sex with his concubines.
      - Absalom did it with his father David's concubines as recorded in 2 Samuel 16:21-22.
      - In this way, Absalom was claiming the throne of his father for himself, having already set up a rival kingdom.

- Very likely, Reuben was making a move here to show that he fully intended to claim his father's place as the leader of the family...
  - Not that he wanted to overthrow his father now, but that he was asserting his right as Jacob's firstborn in this way.
  - Often, the firstborn would begin to exercise a kind of co-leadership with his father before his father died, managing many of the affairs of the home.
    - So Reuben was expressing his intention by taking Bilhah so as to say that he was the one who would take his father's place.
- c. Of course such wicked customs should not be used by God's people!
  - There is another irony here with Reuben...
    - Remember how we saw the irony with Rachel last week who died having a son when she had earlier said "give me children or I die?"
    - Well here is irony with Reuben—he takes Bilhah his father's concubine to claim the rights of the firstborn,
      - And then years later when Jacob declares his last will, Reuben is denied the rights of the firstborn because of this deed!
        - Jacob says of Reuben: **Gen 49:3-4: Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might and the beginning of my strength, the excellency of dignity and the excellency of power. 4 Unstable as water, you shall not excel, because you went up to your father's bed; then you defiled it—he went up to my couch.**
      - The very thing he did to claim the right caused him to lose it and the privilege ended up going to Judah and to Joseph,
        - And Reuben, at that time, will find himself in no position to demand *anything*, finding himself completely at the mercy of Joseph.
- But Reuben's act reveals the deep resentment that Leah's sons had for their father's partiality as they move into the next *to-le-doth*...
  - And this becomes a major theme in the coming years when these tensions grow to such heights that Leah's sons end up selling Joseph into slavery in Egypt and making Jacob think that he has been killed by a wild animal.
- 3. Our text highlights the divisions in this household in verses 23-26.
  - How so?
    - Well look at how Jacob's twelve sons are listed...
      - not according to their birth order, but according to their mothers.
        - There are Leah's children, then Rachel's and then the sons of the concubines.
      - This way of listing them calls further attention to tensions that are there as this family moves into the next generation.
        - It is a foreshadowing of the trouble that is to come.

TRANS> What a shameful thing for the household of God to be thus divided!

B. But consider how the church is divided today!

1. There are thousands of different denominations.
  - There are so many that they cannot all be numbered.
    - Even in our own city, there are Roman Catholics, the Anglicans, the Baptists, the United Churches, the Presbyterians, the Pentecostals, the Congregationalists, the Brethren, the Wesleyans, the Lutherans and Christian Reformed Church, all sorts of independent churches—and there is the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church in America...
  - This is horrendous.
    - All of these divisions are sinful, for we are supposed to all be **one in Christ Jesus**.
  - a. Many of these divisions have been created by those who have departed from the truth and then have kicked out those who are following the truth.
    - That is the way it has always been...
      - The prophets of old were often excluded by the established church...and by the kings of Israel and Judah...
      - Jesus and apostles were put out of the synagogues and of course Jesus was even crucified at the command of the established church.
        - It has continued that way throughout history.
    - Some of these divisions are between believers and unbelievers—as was the case with Jesus and the established church in His day that rejected Him...
      - And as was the case when the Roman church excluded and cut off those who were reforming the church according to apostolic doctrine.
    - But many of these doctrinal divisions are between believers and other believers—as was the case when Judah and Israel divided,
      - and as we see today between those who differ on baptism or church government...or on how God is to be worshipped.
  - b. And then there are divisions that are brought on not because of doctrinal error, but because of envy and petty quarrelling.
    - This seems to be the situation at Corinth that Paul had to address,
      - and it often has a lot to do with some of our divisions today without essentially likeminded churches.
2. But in every case, when you boil it down, our divisions are rooted in sin...
  - There is either doctrinal error, sinful practice, or petty division when we are rather called,
    - to **endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph 4:3)**.
    - We are called to **come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God (Eph 4:13)...by speaking the truth in love...so that we may grow up in all things into Him who is the Head—even Christ (Eph 15)...**
  - The pleading of Paul to the Corinthians (1 Cor 1:10) confronts us and brings us to shame: **I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.**

TRANS> It is to our great shame that the church is as it is.

- No one can claim to be innocent of this horrendous situation just as neither Jacob nor his sons could claim innocence regarding their divisions.
  - The Lord is most certainly displeased with us about this situation!
  - And this is another of the many reasons that we stand in constant need of His forgiveness and mercy!

## II. Division causes a multitude of problems.

A. It destroys our witness to those outside.

1. What are those who are outside supposed to think of us?
  - One church teaches that salvation is by works, another that it is by grace through faith in Christ.
    - How do they even know who to listen to?
  - Of course God guides His elect to churches that bear witness to the truth of the gospel...
    - He convicts His elect of sin so that they can't be satisfied with a false gospel—
      - but as far as the church's witness is concerned—our message is very confused!
2. And not only that, but we who are supposed to be known by our love for one another are found engaging in petty quarrels,
  - quarrels that even the world can see are fueled more by envy than by the love of the truth.
  - If it were not for the powerful working of God, it is a wonder that anyone should ever be converted with a witness like ours!

B. What is more, division is often the occasion for the apostasy of many who grow up in the church...

1. Here they are in the church, and then there is some ugly division—maybe it is a division that has come about because false teachers have taken root in the church...
  - or maybe it is brothers dividing over whether to build a new building for worship...
    - but when divisions like these occur, there are some that are drawn away by those who are teaching error,
      - And others who leave because of disgust and hurt.
2. Of course such persons who depart from the faith never really were in the faith.
  - A heart that is truly in Christ cannot be so easily torn away from Him...
    - but woe to those by whom these offenses come!

C. A third thing our divisions do is keep us from obtaining blessings from God.

1. Reuben was the first of the sons of Jacob, but he lost the blessing of the firstborn...

- Because of the division in Jacob's home that excluded him, he did the foolish act of incest that we just looked at and he lost the blessing...
2. Psalm 133 reminds us that God commands His blessing in the place where the brethren dwell together in unity...
    - There is no way to measure all the blessings that have been lost—the growth, the delight in Christ, the sanctification—that we may have lost because of our divisions.
    - One big area of loss is in the confusion and uncertainty that believers have on matters about which the church is divided...
      - and sometimes there is a loss of the blessing, say, of singing the songs that God has given to us in His Word or the blessing of remembering the Sabbath Day.
- D. Besides this, division in the church is simply unpleasant...
1. Psalm 133:1 reminds us of how good and how pleasant it is for the brethren to dwell together in unity.
    - but how miserable when they don't!
    - What sorrows Jacob experienced from the divisions in his house.
      - How great the pain of the incest of Rueben, of the strife between Joseph and his brothers...
      - Many people would count among their greatest sorrows the divisions they have encountered in the church.
  2. Think of how wrong this is—that there should be sorrow among the redeemed people of God...
    - People who should be full of joy and who should be rejoicing together in their salvation and their wonderful Saviour are instead full of bitterness and strife and quarrelling—or caught in the cross fire of those who are thus engaged.
    - It shifts our focus from the glory of Christ and His kingdom to brooding over what our brother has said or done to us—
      - or scheming about what we will do to set him straight or to vindicate ourselves in the face of his attacks!
- E. Division can even make us physically ill...
- The stress and misery from our divisions can keep us awake at night...
    - It can prevent us from digesting our food...
    - Indeed, stress can weaken our bodies so that they are more susceptible to cancer or heart disease and all sorts of other physical infirmities.
- F. Division hinders our prayers
1. The Lord tells us in James 3 & 4 that He will not hear us if we have bitter envying and strife in our hearts!
    - He chastens us by withholding answers to our prayers until we repent.
    - Psalm 66:18 tells us that if we regard iniquity in our hearts He will not hear us.
  2. Peter warns husbands that if they abuse their wives and do not dwell with them in a tender, understanding way,
    - their prayers will be hindered.

- In Malachi 2:14, it is this very reason that is given to those who are complaining that though they weep at the altar, the Lord does not hear them...
  - He tells them—it is because you have dealt treacherously with your wives!

G. Division also makes the church weak in the public square.

1. When we are united, we are a mighty force to be reckoned with...
  - We see how the early church, though persecuted, turned the morals of their society around so that things like fornication became shameful in the eyes of the societies in which they lived...
    - Instead of falling into the perversity around them as the church in Canada is doing, they brought the people around them to repentance...
      - not until after generations of persecutions—but they did it, even before they entered seats of authority in government...
      - The moral forcefulness of the truth in which they stood brought their enemies to shame.

➤ In our day, I find that more and more evangelicals are starting to wink at fornication.

2. But now what do we see?

- We see things like the sanctifying of the Lord's Day cast off by our government—we see abortion and fornication all around—we see our generation borrowing from our children instead of laying up for them...
  - And nobody is ashamed of these things because the church is not united in her witness against them!
  - Just this week I read articles about so called evangelicals speaking of how it is repressive to expect young adults to abstain for sexual immorality...
    - even though scripture says: **Eph 5:3: But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints...but rather giving of thanks.**
  - This is not something the church ought to be divided about!

TRANS> So you see what a shameful, horrendous thing our divisions are!

- They are a disgrace to our LORD Jesus Christ who died that we might all be one...
  - Not in the pretended unity of the ecumenical movement, but in the unity that comes about when we are all fully following Him.
  - It is our duty to do all we can to pursue this true unity by following Him fully ourselves.
- The division is horrendous, but now I want you to see that in the Lord, there is even encouragement in our divisions!

### III. The Lord uses our division (yes, division!) for His glory.

A. God is sovereign over divisions in the church even though they are wrong.

- He is sovereign over everything that happens—it is according to His providence!

1. Ephesians 1:11 tells us that He works all things according to the counsel of His own will.



- He does it in way such that our actions are still very much our own—we are not forced to do things that we do not want to do...
    - But everything falls out according to His eternal purpose and foreknowledge.
  - This is the teaching of scripture throughout such that even concerning Christ's crucifixion, the church testifies to God that:
    - Acts 4:27-28 **truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done.**
    - And when Peter was preaching to those who had ordered Christ to be crucified, he says of Christ: **Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death;**
      - Their wicked hands were moved by their wicked hearts, but what they did was exactly what God had planned...
      - And we who are redeemed are very glad that He did plan this!
2. His providence even extends to the first fall, even though it was clearly wrong.
- He used it to set the stage for His glory in Christ to be revealed.
  - Think about it...
    - Without the fall, there would have been no cross.
    - We would never have seen the great love of God and the love of Christ so clearly as we do when, according to His eternal plan,
      - He came into our world to take our flesh and that He might then redeem us on the cross, bearing the curse for us.
  - Romans 9 teaches us that all of this was done for the grand demonstration of God's grace!
    - Through the fall, He reveals to His creatures (both men and angels)...
      - His holiness in cursing sin and punishing sinners,
      - And His grace and mercy in redeeming other sins through no merit of their own.
    - And He did all of this in such way that though the plan is His, the sin is entirely ours—of our own doing.

TRANS> Now if it is true that His sovereign providence reaches even to the first fall, it is surely true that it includes the divisions in the church!

3. He is sovereign over divisions in the church too, even though they are wrong.
- a. He uses all things (including our sinful, shameful divisions) for His glory and for the good of His people.
    - Romans 8:28 declares that He works all things together for good to those who love Him and who are called according to His purpose...
      - and surely that includes our sinful divisions in the church.
- And how is He glorified in these you may ask?

- b. He is glorified (or will be glorified) by bringing His elect out of divisions so that in the end they are better than they were before.
  - 1) I can personally testify to this—
    - I have been at the centre of divisions in the church, even in my own Presbytery—and I can testify that it was a time of tremendous growth.
  - 2) And in marital divisions I can testify to the same...
    - In the first nine months of my marriage, what sin was exposed when my wife and I were full of quarrelling and strife...
      - but how God worked in us through those divisions to teach us many things—to work out our problems by His grace.
  - 3) What patience division produces...because you have to guard lest you complain against the Lord,
    - what humility division produces...you see how far short you come,
    - what cultivation of prayer...you pray as never before in times of division,
    - what love...you must learn to love those who are striving with you and pray for them,
    - what perseverance...you have to keep going in times of division and to keep on standing for what you believe is right,
    - what forgiveness...you have to forgive those who have sinned against you and receive forgiveness for your wrongs that are exposed in times of division),
    - what purging of sin (it flows up to surface in all its filthiness in times of vision),
    - what maturity division produces in the people of the LORD!
- c. Yes, division can be the utter ruin of unbelievers—but to the elect of God—
  - it may look like they are practically ruined when the Lord cuts down their pride and their self-sufficiency through divisions...
    - but in the end, it is the very making of them!

TRANS> The Lord of all wisdom sets up the divisions as tools by which He will work in His people.

- B. The division in Jacob's house set the stage for Christ to be revealed in them, through them and to them!
  - 1. It provided occasion for Joseph to serve as a type of Christ in saving his brothers who hated him.
    - Perhaps you know the story that we are soon to explore...
      - How Joseph's brothers so hated him that they sold him as a slave in Egypt, and how Joseph rose to the place of highest authority in Egypt next to Pharaoh himself...
      - And how Joseph's brothers who had sold him end up having to depend on him for food in time of severe famine...
      - And how Joseph, as a glorious picture of Christ, fully forgives them and provides for their salvation in the famine.

- Like Christ, he who was despised and rejected is exalted by God, and in mercy and grace, saves those who hated him!
    - Without the division in Jacob's household, this beautiful picture of redemptive love and mercy could never have blessed the sons of Jacob and all of their posterity down through the ages...
      - We ourselves benefit from this wonderful event!
    - What a time of transformation and growth came to Jacob's whole family through this—
      - this which all began with their wicked sinful divisions that we see them heading into the future with in Genesis 35.
2. These divisions also set the stage for Judah (Jacob's fourth son) to step forward as the forerunner of Christ and to offer himself as a substitute for Benjamin.
- Before the brothers knew that Joseph was the man they were having to negotiate with in order to obtain bread,
    - Joseph tested them to see if they had changed over the years...
    - He commanded them to bring Benjamin whom Jacob had kept at home, being his youngest son, and as far as he knew his only living son by Rachel...
      - And then Joseph arranged matters so that Benjamin fell under accusation of a crime and was sentenced to slavery...
    - And it was then that Judah, the son of Leah, knowing of his father Jacob's love for Benjamin, instead of being controlled by envy,
      - offered to take Benjamin's place—in the same way that Christ took our place when He bore the cross for our sin on the cross!
  - And again, what a beautiful picture was presented to the church in all the years to come by this—
    - this beautiful picture of Christ giving Himself in our place for our sins because of love for us and love for His Father in heaven!
    - A beautiful picture that arose out of sinful wicked division.
3. You can see how with Joseph and Judah, great things came forth out of division...
- a. The glory of Christ's saving work was revealed.
  - b. Judah and Joseph were able to experience something of the sufferings of Christ—which is always a great blessing.
  - c. And they were able to experience in themselves the sanctifying grace of God's Spirit, transforming them so that they were willing to lay down their lives for others in love...
    - something they would never have done apart from the working of God's Spirit in their hearts.

TRANS> All of this came out of their sinful divisions!

C. And now I exhort all of you to make the most of the divisions you have with other believers in your life.

1. Let these divisions humble you and lead you to repentance.
  - If, like Jacob, you can see how your sin has contributed to the division, let that break your pride and bring you to repentance.

- Even if you are the one who is wronged, much sin will be exposed in you—much weakness, much murmuring, much corruption will come to surface.
  - And let the very fact that the church which you are a part of is so divided humble you and make you ashamed.
    - You are part of the problem and so am I—there is no place for pride, only for a broken and contrite heart before God!
2. Let the divisions in your life also strengthen you to stand for what is right and true.
    - Don't give way to what is true just because there is opposition...
      - Because someone says that you are wicked because you do not support abortion or fornication—or because you hold to Sabbath keeping—or whatever...
    - God sends opposition to us when we hold to His truth to strengthen our commitment to Him—our faithfulness...
      - He will give you grace to stand against the pressure and the opposition.
    - Yes, look at the trouble as an opportunity to grow, not as a reason to give up and compromise.
  3. Let the divisions in your life put you on your knees and renew your hope in God.
    - Learn to cry out to God in divisions...
      - For example, if you see one of your children becoming estranged from you—get on your knees and pour out fervent prayers to God—fast and pray and ask God to show you how you have contributed to the problem and how you need to change...
        - Learn to pray as you have never prayed before—with resolve to act on what God shows you...
    - Hope grows when you continue to believe that God will work through the divisions He brings—even when, like Jacob, you are the cause of them!
  4. And finally, look for appropriate ways to lay down your life for others when there is division—look for ways to imitate Jesus Christ.
    - Do as Joseph did...
      - Step in and show love to those who have wronged you—look at it as an opportunity to imitate Christ and to learn of Him!
    - And do as Judah did...
      - Seize the opportunity to lay down your life for others.

**Conclusion:** So you see my brothers and sisters that even our wicked divisions, as wrong and as sinful as they are,

- by God's grace became the stage on which we learn of our precious Saviour!
- Don't despair when you see the sorry state of the church today with all her divisions...
  - Turn your eyes to the LORD in faith—and watch Him work!
  - He is the redeemer who knows how to redeem!