

Homiletics Analysis: Genesis 35

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

Genesis 35 narrates a pivotal moment of covenant renewal and transition in the Jacob narrative. God commands Jacob to return to Bethel — the site of his original vision and vow (Genesis 28) — and Jacob responds with unexpected thoroughness: he calls his household to put away foreign gods, purify themselves, and change garments. The family buries their idols and earrings at Shechem, then travels under divine terror to Bethel. There God appears again, confirms the name Israel, and reaffirms the Abrahamic covenant promises of fruitfulness, land, and the company of kings. The chapter then moves through a series of deaths and births: Rachel dies giving birth to Benjamin, completing the twelve sons; Reuben defiles his father's concubine Bilhah; Isaac dies at Mamre at the age of 180, buried by both Esau and Jacob. The chapter closes with the twelve sons listed by name.

The movement of Genesis 35 is simultaneously backward and forward: backward to Bethel and the original vow, settling the account Jacob made with God over twenty years earlier; forward to the full constitution of Israel as a household of twelve sons, now poised for the Joseph narrative ahead.

This Text — Intent:

God is not merely recording biographical events. Through this chapter, God is demonstrating that He is the one who initiates, sustains, and completes His covenant commitments — regardless of the moral failures, grief, and disorder of the human family He has chosen. Jacob does not return to Bethel because his life is finally clean enough; he returns because God commands it. The idols are buried not because Jacob's household has outgrown them but because God demands exclusive allegiance now. The covenant reaffirmation at Bethel is God's doing, not Jacob's achievement. The deaths of Rachel and Isaac, the shame of Reuben's sin — none of these interrupt the covenant's advance. God's intent through this chapter is to produce in the reader a settled confidence that the covenant does not depend on the covenant people, and a sober recognition that belonging to the covenant family demands a clean break with rival gods.

Subject Sentence:

God renews His covenant with Jacob at Bethel, confirming the promise stands despite human failure and grief.

Primary Claim:

God is calling His covenant people to return to Him with undivided allegiance, and He is demonstrating through the chaos, loss, and failure surrounding that return that the covenant's advance depends entirely on His faithfulness, not theirs.

Interpretive Evaluation

The command to bury the idols (vv. 2–4): A common homiletical reading treats this section as a model of revival or spiritual renewal — Jacob as the leader who calls the household to repentance, and the burying of idols as the pattern for genuine conversion. This reading is not wrong in its content but is wrong in its emphasis. It makes Jacob the moral agent and the primary actor, when the text places God's command (v. 1) as the precipitating cause of everything that follows. Jacob does not spontaneously reform — he obeys a divine command. The Wesleyan and revivalist traditions particularly tend to foreground the human response here; the Reformed reading foregrounds the divine initiative that makes the human response possible and necessary. The burying of idols is genuine, commanded, and expected — but it is the response to grace, not the ground for it.

The “terror of God” (v. 5): Some dispensational and popular readings treat the divine terror that fell on surrounding cities as a kind of general protective miracle, an interesting narrative detail. The Reformed reading sees it as theologically significant: God actively clears the path for His covenant family. The surrounding nations' fear is not coincidental — it is covenantal. God is already functioning as the guarantor of the Abrahamic promise that the land would be given to Abraham's descendants. This is not merely divine protection; it is covenant execution in progress.

The covenant reaffirmation (vv. 9–13): Lutheran exposition tends to read the blessing as pure gospel announcement and to downplay the “be fruitful and multiply” command as residual creation mandate. The Reformed reading, following the covenant structure more carefully, sees the command and the promise as inseparable components of the covenant grant: God commands fruitfulness as He simultaneously guarantees it. The imperative and the indicative are bound together in a way that is characteristic of covenant structure throughout Genesis. Neither should be collapsed into the other.

Reuben's sin (v. 22): The verse is frequently skipped or minimized in exposition as merely background to the later cursing of Reuben in Genesis 49. But its placement here — embedded in the covenant reaffirmation chapter, immediately after the divine blessing — is pointed. The text does not editorialize heavily, but its juxtaposition is the editorial comment: even in the moment of covenant renewal, the chosen family fails. This is not a disruption to the covenant narrative; it is confirmation that the covenant was never dependent on the moral integrity of its human members. The verse deserves to be read, not suppressed.

The deaths of Rachel and Isaac: Some readers treat these deaths as primarily biographical or literary closure. The Reformed reading sees them within the framework of covenant continuity under mortality. The patriarchal generation is passing. Rachel's death in childbirth, giving the twelfth son and thus completing the twelve-tribe family, shows God's purposes advancing through suffering. Isaac's death at Mamre completes the patriarchal succession: the promise made to Abraham is now fully with Jacob/Israel. These are covenant transitions, not merely biographical details.

The Reformed reading governs throughout: God's initiative drives the chapter; human response is genuine but secondary; covenant advance is divine accomplishment through, not because of, the chosen family.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 28:10–22** — Jacob's original Bethel vision and vow, which this chapter fulfills; the covenant promise first given here is confirmed and deepened at the return, demonstrating God's faithfulness across the interval of Jacob's entire adult life.
 - **Genesis 12:1–3, 17:1–8** — The Abrahamic covenant promises (land, seed, nations, kings) restated here in vv. 11–12 follow the same structure as the original Abrahamic grant, demonstrating covenant continuity from Abraham through Isaac through Jacob/Israel.
 - **Joshua 24:14–15, 23** — Joshua's call to put away foreign gods echoes Jacob's command in v. 2; the structural parallel shows that the demand for exclusive covenant allegiance is not unique to this moment but is the recurring demand of the God who calls Israel out of idolatry across every generation.
 - **Romans 9:6–13** — Paul's argument that "not all who are descended from Israel are Israel" draws on the patriarchal narratives; the failures catalogued in Genesis 35 (Reuben, the idols, the grief and disorder) make the point visible that election is not based on moral performance, and covenant advance is by divine purpose, not human merit.
 - **Revelation 7:4–8; 21:12–14** — The twelve tribes named at the end of Genesis 35 become the governing structural image of the people of God through the entire canon; their origin in this imperfect, grief-marked, idol-burying household is the foundation on which all subsequent uses of "the twelve" rest.
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Aim:

To demonstrate from Genesis 35 that God’s covenant faithfulness — not Jacob’s spiritual performance — is what carries His people through failure, grief, and disorder to the fulfillment of His purposes, and to call the reader to the exclusive allegiance God demands from those He has claimed.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
35:1	God commands Jacob: Go to Bethel, dwell there, build an altar	Divine initiative — the command precedes Jacob’s action throughout
35:2–3	Jacob commands his household: put away foreign gods, purify, change garments	Jacob’s response is comprehensive — not just symbolic but structural; “strange gods among you” implies the idols came from Rachel (31:19) and others
35:4	Household surrenders idols and earrings; Jacob buries them under the oak at Shechem	The earrings likely carried protective/religious significance; burial at Shechem echoes the site of earlier violence and defilement (ch. 34)
35:5	Terror of God falls on surrounding cities; no pursuit of Jacob’s family	Divine protective action; covenantal significance — God clears the path for His covenant family
35:6–7	Jacob arrives at Luz/Bethel; builds the altar; names it El-Bethel	“El-Bethel” — “God of the House of God”; Jacob names not merely the place but the God who revealed Himself there
35:8	Death and burial of Deborah, Rebekah’s nurse, beneath “the oak of weeping”	Brief but honored; grief is present even in the journey toward covenant renewal
35:9–10	God appears to Jacob again, blesses him, confirms the name Israel	“Again” — echoes the Peniel encounter (32:28); the name change is now permanently confirmed by God Himself, not merely given at Peniel

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
35:11	God commands: be fruitful and multiply; nations and kings will come from you	Adamic (1:28) and Abrahamic (17:6) language converges; covenant imperative and promise interlocked
35:12	God reaffirms the land grant to Abraham and Isaac, now given to Jacob/Israel	Covenant continuity from the third generation; Jacob receives what was promised to his grandfather
35:13	God goes up from Jacob at the place where He spoke	Divine theophany conclusion; God initiates, speaks, and departs — the encounter is on His terms
35:14–15	Jacob sets up a stone pillar, pours drink offering and oil, names the place Bethel	Intentional echo of Genesis 28:18; Jacob completes the act he began at the original vision
35:16–18	Departure from Bethel; Rachel goes into hard labor; dies giving birth to Benjamin	Rachel names him Ben-oni (“son of my sorrow”); Jacob renames him Benjamin (“son of my right hand”); covenant purposes advance through death
35:19–20	Rachel buried on the road to Ephrath/Bethlehem; Jacob erects a pillar	A second pillar — one for covenant worship (v. 14), one for grief (v. 20); both belong to the story
35:21–22a	Israel journeys on; Reuben lies with Bilhah, Jacob’s concubine; Israel hears of it	The text reports without lengthy commentary; the sin is recorded, heard, and its consequences will come later (49:3–4)
35:22b–26	List of Jacob’s twelve sons, organized by mother	The full household now constituted: twelve sons from four women; this is the structural foundation of the twelve tribes
35:27–29	Jacob comes to Isaac at Mamre; Isaac dies at 180; buried by Esau and Jacob	Covenant succession complete; Isaac’s death closes the middle

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	together	generation; the brothers united in burial echo the possibility of reconciliation (cf. 33:4)

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	35:1–8	Return and Purification: God Commands; Jacob Obeys
2	35:9–15	Covenant Renewal: God Appears, Blesses, and Reaffirms the Promise
3	35:16–22a	Grief and Failure: Rachel Dies; Reuben Sins
4	35:22b–29	Covenant Continuity: The Twelve Named; Isaac Dies

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: God renews His covenant with Jacob at Bethel, confirming the promise stands despite human failure and grief.

Primary Claim: God is calling His covenant people to return to Him with undivided allegiance, and He is demonstrating through the chaos, loss, and failure surrounding that return that the covenant's advance depends entirely on His faithfulness, not theirs.

Applications (Five)

1. The idols in your household have names — and God names them before you do. (*Mind/Belief*)

Jacob's household had been carrying foreign gods — likely for years, probably since Rachel stole them from Laban (31:19). God knew. The command to bury them was not a revelation to God; it was a clarification to Jacob. The reader should resist the comfortable assumption that unaddressed idolatries in the household are unknown to God or tolerated by Him. The call to Bethel was also a call to honesty about what had been accumulating. Every household that names itself as belonging to God has things in it that need to be buried — objects, habits, loyalties, relationships that carry rival claims on the soul. The first work of this passage is not comfort but inventory.

2. You return to God not when your life is clean enough but when He commands it — and that is grace. (*Affections/Worship*)

Jacob had made a vow at Bethel more than twenty years before. He had not kept it promptly. His delay was not punished with covenant cancellation — it was ended by a divine command. God did not wait for Jacob to achieve sufficient spiritual momentum to return. He called Jacob to return while Jacob was still surrounded by idols, grief, and the aftermath of Shechem. The reader who has been delaying return — who has been waiting until they feel worthy or ready — should understand that the command itself is the grace. God calling you back is the evidence He has not finished with you. The appropriate response to this is not relief followed by complacency but worship followed by movement.

3. Exclusive allegiance to God means physically putting away what competes — not merely mentally acknowledging its inadequacy. (*Will/Behavior*)

Jacob did not ask his household to reflect on why idols were insufficient. He said: give them to me, and I will bury them. The act was concrete, external, and irreversible. The earrings — likely protective amulets, symbols of divided religious loyalty — went into the ground under the oak at Shechem. Reformed piety has sometimes been too cognitive in its account of sanctification, as if the life of faith were primarily a matter of correct doctrine producing changed interior states. This passage insists on concrete acts of divestiture. What specific thing needs to go into the ground? The application is not “reconsider your priorities.” It is: what are you burying, where, and when?

4. The grief and failure inside the covenant family do not indicate that God has abandoned His purposes — they indicate that His purposes are larger than our performance. (*Mind/Belief*)

Between the covenant renewal at Bethel (vv. 9–15) and the closing of the chapter, we have: the death of Rebekah’s nurse, the death of Rachel in childbirth, the sexual sin of Reuben, and the death of Isaac. The covenant chapter is not a chapter of triumph — it is a chapter of covenant advance through wreckage. The reader who concludes from persistent grief, family disorder, or moral failure in their own household that God’s purposes must have moved on is reading the narrative backwards. Genesis 35 is God’s explicit statement that the covenant family at its most chaotic is still the covenant family. This does not produce complacency about sin; it produces endurance through suffering.

5. The God who calls you back to Himself has already been the God of the place you are returning to — He is not a stranger there. (*Affections/Worship*)

Jacob names the altar “El-Bethel” — not “Bethel” but “God of Bethel.” He is not naming a place; he is naming the God who was at the place before he ever arrived. When Jacob returns, he is not discovering somewhere new; he is returning to where God already was. The reader who has experienced spiritual distance — who feels that return to God requires navigating back to a place of former intimacy that may or may not still be there — should understand: God has been at Bethel the whole time. He was there when Jacob first arrived

in fear and poverty. He was there through the twenty years of absence. He was there commanding the return before Jacob set out. The reader's return is not a journey to a place God might inhabit; it is a journey to a place God has never left.

Theological Importance:

Genesis 35 teaches that the God of the covenant is both the initiator and the sustainer of His own purposes. The divine command precedes every act of human obedience in this chapter — Jacob does not return, purify, or build without being told. The covenant reaffirmation in verses 9–13 converges the Adamic mandate, the Abrahamic promise, and the specific grant of land into a single divine declaration over Jacob/Israel, demonstrating that these are not three separate threads but one integrated covenant purpose advancing through the patriarchal line. God's willingness to appear, bless, and reaffirm the covenant in a chapter that also contains Reuben's sexual sin, Rachel's death in childbirth, and the grief of accumulated losses establishes that divine faithfulness is not contingent on the moral condition of the covenant family. The God of Genesis 35 is not a God who shows up when the house is in order; He is the God who orders the household by showing up.

Reformed Theological Significance:

Genesis 35 is a sustained exegetical argument against the assumption that covenant blessing is earned by covenant performance. The Reformed doctrine of unconditional election finds narrative embodiment here: God reaffirms His covenant with Jacob/Israel not because Jacob has demonstrated worthy stewardship of the earlier promise but because God bound Himself to do so. The purging of idols is not the precondition of grace — it is the response to the grace already enacted in God's command to return. The chapter also illustrates what Calvin and the Westminster Confession name as the perseverance of the covenant purposes: neither the sins of the covenant people (Reuben), nor the sorrows of the covenant journey (Rachel's death), nor the dying of the older generation (Isaac) interrupts the forward movement of the promise. The full constituting of the twelve sons at the chapter's close shows the gospel-shaped logic of the whole: what God began in Abraham He completes through broken, grieving, idol-burying people — not because of them, but despite them, and entirely for His own name's sake.

Main Takeaway:

God is not waiting for your household to be clean before He calls you back to Himself — He is calling you back so that it can be. The covenant His people walk in is not sustained by their faithfulness but by His; the grief, failure, and disorder inside the covenant family in Genesis 35 are not the end of the story but the terrain through which the story advances.

Bury the idols. Return to Bethel. The God who was there when you first arrived has been there the whole time you were away.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Turning the idol-burial into a self-improvement program.** The most common mishandling of verses 2–4 is to extract them as a standalone application: “What idols do you need to bury?” without grounding the question in the divine command that precedes it (v. 1). Decontextualized, the burial of idols becomes a technique for spiritual breakthrough — something Jacob’s household does in order to get God’s blessing. The text runs in the opposite direction: God’s command and purpose precede and ground the act of purification. The application of “bury your idols” must be anchored in “God has called you to return, and this is what that return requires” — not in “this is how you get God to show up.”
- **Skipping or softening Reuben’s sin.** Verse 22a is brief and uncomfortable, and many expositors either omit it entirely or mention it only as background to Genesis 49. But its placement is exegetically significant: it falls immediately after the covenant renewal. The textual juxtaposition is the sermon — covenant blessing does not produce a morally perfected household overnight, and the reader who expects otherwise will either despair when their own household fails or conclude that failure disqualifies them from covenant standing. Reuben’s sin belongs in the exposition precisely because it is so jarring. The covenant advances; Israel hears; the text moves on. God’s purposes are not derailed.
- **Reading Rachel’s death as only biographical.** Rachel’s death in childbirth while producing the twelfth son is not merely a poignant narrative moment. It is the convergence of the covenant’s cost and the covenant’s advance — the full constitution of the twelve tribes is completed through death and grief. Preaching that dwells only on the pathos without attending to what is being accomplished (the twelve are now complete) misses the theological register. Equally, preaching that rushes past the grief to the theological point dishonors the text’s careful attention to Rachel’s suffering and Jacob’s memorial pillar. Both must be held.
- **Treating the chapter as primarily about Jacob’s spiritual growth.** A character-study approach to Genesis 35 — Jacob matures, finally fulfills his vow, demonstrates genuine leadership of his household — produces a moralistic sermon with Jacob as the hero. The text will not sustain this reading under pressure: Jacob delays his return for decades, his household is full of idols, his firstborn son defiles his concubine in the same chapter as the covenant renewal, and the divine initiative is everywhere foregrounded. Jacob is not the hero of Genesis 35. He is the object of God’s faithfulness and the recipient of God’s command. Exposition should make this clear.

- **Disconnecting the covenant reaffirmation (vv. 9–13) from the surrounding disorder.** The temptation is to preach verses 9–13 as a self-contained covenant theology passage, treating the surrounding narrative as mere frame. But the theological content of those verses gains its full force precisely because of the surrounding disorder. God is not blessing a household that has achieved the conditions for blessing; He is blessing a household in the middle of grief, sin, and unfinished purification. The covenant's unconditional character is visible only against the backdrop of the family's conditional unworthiness. Lift verses 9–13 out of their context and you lose the argument.
- **Missing the vow-fulfillment structure.** Genesis 35 is the fulfillment of Jacob's vow in Genesis 28:20–22 — a vow made in fear and poverty and not fulfilled promptly. Exposition that does not note this connection deprives the reader of the passage's most important interpretive key: this is not a random divine appearance. This is God holding Jacob to account for an unfinished vow, and God initiating the return that Jacob had delayed. The reader who has unfinished vows of their own — promises made to God in moments of crisis, never kept — is addressed directly by the structure of the chapter. That connection should be made explicit.