#1. WHO IS JACOB?

Jacob's family had sunk to the level of immoral and sordid society around them. Rather than being a light of God's love and grace in a sinful world and blessing to sinful people, Jacob's family is now a curse to those around them. In Jacob's own words, his family was "stinking up" the place (Genesis 34:30). The pagans around them now hate them with a passion because of the massacre at Shechem. Jacob's daughter is now defiled; his sons are mass-murderers and thieves. As a leader of His family, Jacob isn't much to look up to. Read Genesis 35:1-15.

We also learn that Jacob's household has lots of idols, but Jacob is supposed to be the follower of the one and only God (Note: the earrings that coordinated with the idols are a strong indicator that these idols were actually being worshipped). Compare all this to the constant faithfulness of God, who steps into the chaos and disorder and calls Jacob, yet again, to go to Bethel and speaks words of amazing grace to His wayward, fickle servant.

#2. CLEANING HOUSE & NAMING NAMES

God did not say anything to Jacob about "hiding the strange gods" or changing garments in His command of Genesis 35:1, yet we find Jacob telling his household about these matters. What does this tell you about Jacob?

In what ways do we, like Jacob, carry "idols" or distractions in our lives that hinder our relationship with God and make our lives feel chaotic or unfaithful? One what to diagnose idols is to think about our reactions whenever we don't get our heart's desire or when our "heart's desire" is taken away. Jesus said, "Where your treasure is there heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21). How do we address these idols in worship every Sunday at our own Bethel—St. John? At Bethel, Jacob is reminded of His new name. What name are we reminded of whenever we begin our worship?

#3. SURROUNDED BY SORROWS

Read Genesis 35:16-29. In this passage, Jacob faces profound loss—the death of his beloved wife and father—and the painful revelation of his son's troubling actions. These events remind us that grief and disappointment are part of life's harsh realities, even for those who walk closely with God and have received His promises.

How do you relate to Jacob's experience of sudden loss and betrayal? When life takes unexpected and painful turns, what emotions or questions arise for you? In what ways can faith help us navigate through these difficult seasons? Have you found any particular practices, perspectives, or community support that have helped you respond to such challenges?

4. Hebrews 11 highlights the faith of many imperfect people who trusted God's promises despite hardship, failure, and uncertainty. How does Jacob's journey—from his family's brokenness, his own idolatry, and sorrow, to his obedience and perseverance—help us understand the nature of faith described in Hebrews 11? In what ways does his story encourage us to keep trusting God even when our lives feel messy or our circumstances seem hopeless?

5. What significant moment in Jesus' life can you connect with the notes about Rachel's death and burial near Bethlehem in Ephrathah? See Matthew 2:16-23 & Jeremiah 2:17-18.

SESSION 11 Answer Key:

1. It's probably been a much as 10 years since Jacob came from Haran. And look at all the trouble he's in. I find that Jacob proves to be more of a negative example than a positive one.

   Like David, Jacob is a terrible father:
   - He treated his wives unequally, which caused terrible problems for his children.
   - He didn't think of the consequence for his children when he took handmaidens for procreation.
   - There is no mention of an altar during his time in Haran. Did he teach his children the faith?
   - He did not name any of his children except Benjamin.
   - His fear of Laban and Esau didn't set a good example for his sons.
   - His prioritized line up of wives and children at the Jabbok didn't help things.
   - He chose to stay in Shechem rather than go to Bethel which only exposed his children to the wicked influences of that place.
   - He didn't seem to care that much about justice for Dinah and allowed his volatile sons to handle the situation.
   - He did not discipline his sons for their murderous actions.

   I wish he would be more zealous for being faithful to God in the day-to-day. But He is so much like any of us. The faith we profess with our lips is not always lived out in our lives. But the good news is that Jacob is not the main actor in the story. God is! And He is faithful and gracious and merciful and good, even to sinners like Jacob and to us

2. Guilty conscience? We may not have actual statues and shrines that signify our idolatry, but there are many things in our lives that reveal our devotion. How many these things put us into compromising positions, taking us away from worship, causing us to associate with godless people, and skew our priorities away from the word of God? In response to this reality (and it is our everyday reality), the first thing we do in worship is confess our sins and unworthiness. And we worship in our Baptismal name: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It reminds us who we belong to and all the promises that are ours because of that name put upon us.

3. It's interesting that even though most people are willing to admit that there is a God and that God is GOD! --meaning He's in charge—when bad things happen, it's often easy for people to reject God or get mad at Him. The only way to overcome that is to remember and celebrate His promises often, which guarantee us that in Jesus' death and resurrection we have eternal life in a New Heaven and Earth.

4. Jacob's journey shows us that faith is not about perfection or having everything together—it's about trusting God even when life is difficult, confusing, or painful. Throughout his life, Jacob faced many challenges: family conflicts, personal mistakes like idolatry, and deep sorrow. Yet, despite these struggles, he continued to seek God, obey Him, and hold onto His promises. Hebrews 11 praises people who trusted God in uncertainty and weakness, and Jacob fits this pattern well. His story encourages us by showing that faith is persistent and often grows through hardship. Even when our lives feel messy or our mistakes weigh heavily on us, God remains faithful, and He meets us in our weakness. Jacob's example reminds us that God's promises are sure, and our faith can be renewed as we choose to trust Him day by day, regardless of our circumstances.

5. Now, for those who might not know, the prophet Jeremiah lived some 600 years before Jesus was born. Rachel was even older, some 1200 years before Jeremiah.

   We know she was the beloved second wife of Jacob (Genesis 29-35), and initially was intended to be his bride. However, her father deceived Jacob, tricking him into marrying her older sister Leah. Rachel had to endure seven long years of waiting to finally marry the man she loved. Yet, even after their union, Rachel faced immense hardship; she struggled with barrenness for much of their marriage. Eventually, God blessed her with a son named Joseph.

Tragically, Rachel's suffering didn't end there. She later gave birth again but died in childbirth. She was buried in Ramah, not all that far from Bethlehem. Her legacy of sorrow and mourning makes her the Old Testament embodiment of pain and loss, a living example of the struggles that will transcend generations of God's people that come after her. It's through the lens of Rachel's story, that Jeremiah the prophet, some 1200 years later, will lament the destruction of Israel and the exile of the Israelites to Babylon. Those exiles would pass through Ramah on their way to Babylon, and Jeremiah swears he could hear old Rachel weeping, weeping for her children "because they are no more" (Jeremiah 31:15-17).
And then Matthew, does the same thing in our text. But Matthew isn't just doing this for sentimental purposes. No. He's highlighting how all throughout salvation history, whenever God's people suffered great tragedy and violence and thought all was lost, the truth was that God was still at work for them, accomplishing salvation for them. They couldn't always see the big picture, but God could, and nothing could stop God from making it a reality—not even when Rachel's son, Joseph, was sold into slavery by his brothers, not even when Isreal was exiled to Babylon, and not even when Herod tried to kill Jesus by slaughtering the baby boys of Jerusalem. God's salvation in Christ is unstoppable! It doesn't change; not even when evil, wicked, violent things happen in our world today. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.

The weeping of Rachel, then, is a poignant image not only of enduring sorrow but also of a relentless yearning for justice and redemption and hope. It inspires us to become beacons of hope in a world that desperately needs it—to live, act, and love in ways that foster real change. As we step into the new year, we carry with us the promise that God walks alongside us, even amidst the darkest days or the most tragic moments—even amidst tragedies like what happened in New Orleans. Rachel's weeping serves as a poignant reminder of our collective struggle and shared hope, illuminating a path in the darkness towards the light that broke into the world in Bethlehem and still shines brightly of God's love and salvation, today.

Extra… though we won't cover chapter 36 in detail:

36:1 *"The generations of Esau"*—This is the ninth history in the book of Genesis.

36:8 "*Esau . . . Edom"*—The name Esau may mean "hairy." The name Edom means "red." The place where Esau lived came to be called Edom. The land of Edom is also called Seir. This land is southeast of the Dead Sea. Deuteronomy 2:12 says, "The Horites also lived in Seir formerly, but the people of Esau dispossessed them and destroyed them from before them and settled in their place."

36:12 *"Amalek"*—The Amalekites were a desert people. They were the first to oppose the Israelites after they left Egypt (Exodus 17:8–16).

36:15 *"Chiefs"*—It is interesting that almost everyone born from Abraham's line became a great person or the head of a large group of people. We see this in Ishmael's case, and now we see it in Esau's case.