

SERIES: Unwavering Faith? (Genesis Vol. 3)

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When we started this series, I talked about this mysterious relationship between the sovereignty of God—the fact that He has a plan and a purpose in the world and a plan and a purpose for your life—with the reality that as people made in His image, we have a will and we choose. How those two work together is really a mystery.

One of the best ways to illustrate that is simply through the patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Clearly, God has a plan and purpose. God has made a promise to them. He *will* keep that promise. But at the same time, they have the freedom to make choices, and those choices direct their pathway through life and certainly have consequences. You can see both at work; it's just hard sometimes to tell how they work together.

Now the danger is, sometimes we move to extremes in trying to figure this out. Sometimes people move to the extreme of sovereignty—that God has absolutely everything planned to the degree that He accomplishes everything, while we're kind of robots and really don't have choices. It's a form of fatalism.

I remember one time I was in a conversation with a husband years ago. He had been a very poor husband, and his wife ended up leaving him. He was sitting in my office and he was a broken man. He went through this whole story, and then he ended his story by saying, “Why would God do this to me?” So I very gently tried to walk him back through—“God didn't do this to you. *You* did this to you”—trying to get him to come to grips with that. I went back through his story and thought he was understanding. But at the end of my fine explanation, he looked me in the eye and said, “Yeah but, why did God do this to me?” There was just some disconnect between his choices and what happened. But that's taking sovereignty to this point of *God did this or it wouldn't have happened*.

Go to the other end of the scale and it's people that view God as just a cosmic spectator who stays out of it, and we're all on our own. That certainly isn't true. It is somewhere in the middle of realizing God is sovereign and He has a plan and purpose for the world and for my life, and I trust that. But it is also understanding that I'm responsible for my choices and there are consequences to those choices, and they determine my pathway through life.

Jacob is a classic example of that. God made a promise and Jacob believed it. There's no question he believed it and there was an outflow of expression in his life as he worshiped God, as he sacrificed for God. But what does that mean? What do the days and weeks and months ahead look like? Does that mean that God is going to smooth out his pathway—that it's going to be smooth sailing?

When we say that we believe and we trust God, what does that mean? What does that look like practically, lived out in life? Turn with me in the Bible to Genesis 29 and let's see what we can find out.

Genesis 29:1 says:

Then Jacob went on his journey, and came to the land of the sons of the east.
(*NASB)

The opening phrase of this story, "Jacob went on his journey," is actually the Hebrew that means Jacob lifted up his feet. We would probably say in our language, "He had a bounce in his steps." It's kind of a poetic way of saying Jacob was a new man. The night before, he was filled with fear and there was a hopelessness to his situation. But God had visited him and made a promise of His presence and His provision and protection. And Jacob believed that. So now he's got a renewed sense of hope. There's a bounce in his steps. We don't really know much about this long 500-mile journey; we just pick up the story when he arrives.

He looked, and saw a well in the field, and behold, three flocks of sheep were lying there beside it, for from that well they watered the flocks. Now the stone on the mouth of the well was large. When all the flocks were gathered there, they would then roll the stone from the mouth of the well, and water the sheep, and put the stone back in its place on the mouth of the well.

Jacob said to them, "My brothers, where are you from?" And they said, "We are from Haran." He said to them, "Do you know Laban the son of Nahor? And they said, "We know him." And he said to them, "Is it well with him?" And they said, "It is well, and here is Rachel his daughter coming with the sheep." He said, "Behold, it is still high day; it is not time for the livestock to be gathered. Water the sheep, and go, pasture them." But they said, "We cannot, until all the flocks are gathered, and they roll the stone from the mouth of the well; then we water the sheep."

While he was still speaking with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep, for she was a shepherdess. When Jacob saw Rachel the daughter of Laban his mother's brother, and the sheep of Laban his mother's brother, Jacob went up and rolled the stone from the mouth of the well and watered the flock of Laban his mother's brother. Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and lifted his voice and wept. Jacob told Rachel that he was a relative of her father and that he was Rebekah's son, and she ran and told her father.

So when Laban heard the news of Jacob his sister's son, he ran to meet him, and embraced him and kissed him and brought him to his house. Then he related to Laban all these things. Laban said to him, "Surely you are my bone and my flesh." And he stayed with him a month. (Vs. 2-14)

Very interesting story. It's not hard to see the sovereignty of God in that large area that was unfamiliar to Jacob—that he would happen to go right to *the* well that would have Laban's family there. And here is Rachel, Laban's daughter, walking up to the well. So you can see God's sovereignty in all of that.

But one of the things we notice when we read this story would be the similarity in this story with the story in Chapter 24 when Abraham's servant went to find a bride for Isaac. In the reading of the book of Genesis, the author would have expected it would have been about 15 minutes ago. So the story would be vivid in our memory from Chapter 24 as we go into Chapter 29. And the similarities are enough that we say he's inviting us to make a comparison.

You remember, Abraham knew it was time for Isaac to have a wife. At this time in Abraham's life, he was very godly. He walked by faith and his influence was felt on the people around him. So Abraham sent one of his servants to get a wife for Isaac, because he was fearful if Isaac left the land he wouldn't come back. But Abraham's servant was a godly man and he trusted him completely. So he went and he had this exchange with Laban in order to purchase Rebekah for Isaac. He met Rebekah at the well. They have a very similar scene as described in Chapter 29.

But there are some dramatic differences, and that's really what the writer wants us to notice. One of the dramatic differences would be that when Abraham's servant went on his journey, he had ten camels loaded down with Abraham's wealth in order to purchase this bride. Whereas, Jacob traveled alone and he had nothing—because Jacob was fleeing for his life; he was living with the consequences of some bad decisions.

The other thing we notice is that Abraham's servant was a very godly man, and throughout that story in Chapter 24, he's very aware of God's presence with him. He talks to God; he prays with God and he wants God to lead him and to guide him and direct him to exactly the right person that *God* has chosen. So they come up with a plan, and God follows through with this plan; and it becomes obvious who God has chosen. And the servant of Abraham worships God for His answered prayer. That's a huge part of that story.

But when we read this story in Chapter 29, there's none of that. There's no talk of Jacob talking to God, praying, seeking God's direction or His guidance. It's as if Jacob is on his own. Now one might say, "Well, maybe he did prayerfully take this journey; we're just not told that." But that doesn't really make any sense—because when you read Chapter 24, that is a huge part of that chapter; and there is just silence in Chapter 29. Clearly, the writer is drawing a contrast.

I think Jacob's motives are good. I think his intentions are good, but he does not yet understand what it means that God's presence is with him to lead him and guide him and direct him. And because of that, he's going to make some choices and he's going to have to live with the consequences of those choices.

One of the ways that is vividly portrayed in this particular story is with this whole discussion related to this large stone that covered the well. It seems to be a fairly prominent issue in this story, and we find ourselves wondering, *Who cares? Who cares if there's a stone on the well and how many people it takes to move it so the sheep can drink?* But you remember, in the previous story there was a great emphasis on the stone, the big rock, that Jacob had put by his head, because that was his protection in the night. But at the end of the story, when he believes that *God* will be his protection and God's presence will be with him, he in a sense sanctifies that stone as a way of saying, *I now know God will be my protector and God's presence will be with me.*

So now Jacob's taking this journey and here's this large stone on this well. We're told in the story it was so big that it took a number of shepherds or shepherdesses to lift it together. That's what they said: "We have to wait until lots of the flocks are here and we have enough people to move this stone." But Jacob decides to do it himself.

Now just picture that scene of Jacob moaning and groaning and grunting trying to get that stone off the well so that Rachel's sheep can drink. There's a picture there that that's still where Jacob is at. He's still on his own, operating in his own strength and his own power. If you can visualize what that would look like, it's an imagery of where Jacob is still at in his thinking. He's still trying to do this himself.

Do you remember that great story where Jacob has this dream of a ladder coming down from the Heavens right to his feet. We find out in the New Testament that ladder is Jesus Christ Himself, the Messiah, and He is that connection between a holy God and sinful people. It's the very power and presence of God that descends that ladder and actually comes into our lives, and He dwells in His people personally—that He might lead us and guide us and direct us in a very personal and intimate way. But Jacob still doesn't understand that.

Years ago, Patti and I took a trip to South America. We started in Georgetown, Guyana. We were there for several days, and then we flew to northern Guyana to a little jungle village called Lethem. We were told, "When you get in Lethem, you'll land at the airport; you'll need to find the international crossing; there you'll find a ferry boat. Go across on the ferry boat, and on the other side is the border of Brazil. Mark and Diane Ellis, the missionaries, will meet you there." Fine. Sounds like a plan.

So we flew from Georgetown to Lethem, and found that the airport was really just a cut in the jungle, with an old shack that was falling over, sitting beside it. That was the airport. We thought, *Well, okay*. So we got out and we were looking for the international crossing...and we couldn't find one. We talked to some people and we found somebody that spoke English and asked him where the international crossing was. He said, "Well, which one?" I said, "Well, I don't know. We're just supposed to cross the international crossing." He said, "Well, there are several here." So he took us down to the river.

Now you have to realize, I'm imagining in my mind a building...probably some international flags...maybe a gift shop. [Laughter] And all we found was this dirt spot where the bank had been worn by the river. And there was about a 20 x 20 metal barge with an old motor on the back. That was the international crossing. And that was the ferry. He said, "There are about three of these up and down the river. Which one do you want?" I said, "Well, where's Brazil?" And he said, "That's the dirt spot on the bank over there." [Laughter] So we got on, and they said something to each other, and off we went.

Now I have to tell you, on that barge ride that was probably ten minutes, Patti was not happy. [Laughter] I don't want to tell you more, but, [Laughter] she wasn't. She first was upset because, when we flew, the pilot was in the cockpit and the door was open and he spent most of the flight swatting flies with a newspaper. She thought he should be paying attention to his flying. [Laughter] But this barge ride kind of put her over the top. [Laughter]

So we land on the bank and the barge leaves, and we're just standing there. There's a dirt patch and we're surrounded by jungle. We're not even sure what country we're in at this point. [Laughter] And I have to say the anxiety level was moving up. We waited awhile—maybe 30 or

45 minutes—and finally up drives this jeep. It was Mark and Diane Ellis. Man, were we relieved! And from that moment on, we had a great time—because they knew the language; they knew the country; they knew exactly where we were going; they had a plan. We just relaxed and had a great time.

How strange it would have been for us to have continued to try to navigate ourselves, when we now had a guide who knew the country, knew the language, knew the people, and had a plan.

But isn't that often how we live out our Christian lives? When we trust Jesus as Savior, God has promised: "I give you My very presence. I live within you. I promise I'll lead you; I'll guide you; I'll direct you every step of the way." But so often we just continue to navigate as if He's not there, just like we did before. We're lost and we're guessing and we're making bad decisions—and we're living with the consequences of that. Just like Jacob, sometimes we just don't get it. And there's a price to pay for that.

Well, Jacob meets Rachel. He introduces himself, gives her a kiss (not a romantic kiss, but more like a "we're family" kiss). She runs back to Laban, and Laban dashes down to meet Jacob. Now I happen to think Laban had dollar signs in his eyes—because the last time this transaction happened where Abraham had sent someone to negotiate for a wife, Laban became a very rich man: ten camels full of wealth. So he hears "another relative of Abraham" and he's all over that. He runs down there; and probably much to his dismay, he finds Jacob with *nothing*. But he invites him into the house and he's still going to *get* something from Jacob.

So the story goes on:

Then Laban said to Jacob, "Because you are my relative, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?" Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. And Leah's eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful of form and face. Now Jacob loved Rachel, so he said, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel." Laban said, "It is better that I give her to you than to another man; stay with me." So Jacob served seven years for Rachel and they seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her. (Vs. 15-20)

Whenever you see a word or a phrase repeated often in a Hebrew narrative, you want to notice that—especially if it feels like it's repeated in an unnatural way. From Verses 15-30 the word "serve" is repeated seven times. The writer is trying to make a point that this one who is the Promised Seed, where the older would serve the younger because of his choices, now finds himself as a servant of his uncle Laban. There's a price to pay for his choices.

Nat: Bryan, I love that illustration of your trip to Guyana. Why do we as Christians so often seem to live our lives as if God is not with us?

Bryan: Yeah, great question. I would suggest it's our default mode. So that's how we live unless we intentionally choose otherwise. So I think it's how we have lived. It's our habit. It's our pattern, it's what we know. I think it's also reflective of our desire to be our own god. And so we don't release the reins easily and let God lead and control us.

Nat: So this connection between our choices and the consequences seems so obvious, but like you said, people often fail to connect the dots. Why is that?

Bryan: It is very obvious and it's very interesting, how many times we've had conversations, with people who see no connection between their terrible choices and the consequences therein. And there's a blindness, a disconnect to that. Why? Probably because sin causes us to blame God. And you think about Genesis Three, Adam blamed Eve. Eve blamed the serpent. It's the way it's been from the beginning. I think in Genesis Three, you also have that first instinct is to hide. So instead of facing that we hide and hide then turns to blame. There's kind of a disconnect that this is my fault, we just don't face into it and I think we're deceived. You know, that's a scary thing that I can think I'm right when in reality I'm not; the essence of deception is I don't realize I'm deceived.

Nat: You know, as I was listening to your message, one of the things I thought of was how people demonstrate this all the time. They have an authority figure in their lives and yet they really don't seem to care. I think we see this in reality TV shows actually. You think people would react a certain way because they've got a camera in their face, and that they wouldn't behave a certain way, either because of the camera, because of the viewers, or because of maybe a consequence. But the reality is, fast forward an hour, five hours, two days of being in front, they go on like that's not even there. So we see it all the time and we shouldn't be surprised by it in our behavior and relationship with God.

Bryan: Yeah. Old habits and patterns eventually win out.

Nat: Exactly right. So in your message, that comparison between Abraham's servant searching for a bride for Isaac and Jacob's search is very interesting. Jacob's motives were right, but how he went about finding a bride was really the problem. Correct?

Bryan: Right. So I love these Old Testament narratives, and this is common that a writer invites us to compare this story with another story. So there's no question that's what the writer's doing. So you have the contrast between Abraham's servant, and the emphasis on God guiding him every step of the way, and Jacob apparently not seeking God's guidance. So just like you said, I think Jacob's motives are right. He's tried to do the right thing, but he still hasn't learned what it means to trust God. And so I think he's trying to do the right thing, but I think he's doing it on his own, and I do think that gets him into trouble, which creates consequences that will affect about the next 20 years of his life.

Nat: Yeah. One of the things I enjoy about getting into the Bible is unfortunately, I guess I see a lot of myself in the characters every time.

Bryan: Yeah, I do too. Jacob's still in the driver's seat. It's not hard for me to relate to that, and I think as pastors, we've both seen a lot of well-intentioned disasters.

Nat: Absolutely, absolutely. Great thoughts, Bryan. Thank you.