



SERIES: Unwavering Faith (Genesis Vol. 3)

By Pastor Bryan Clark

Message Title: Jacob Prospers Pt. 1

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How do you get a 1,000 pound horse to do what you want him to do? One thing I can tell you for sure, you can't make that horse do anything he does not want to do. It has something to do with the fact that he weighs 1,000 pounds and you weigh 200 pounds. So you have to get him to *want* to do what you want him to do, *when* you want him to do it. But how?

It starts by having it very clear in your mind what it is you want this horse to do. The horse cannot go from nothing to that, so you break it down into little incremental steps. Then this is the key: when you give him your cue, you watch for the slightest hint of movement in the right direction. Sometimes it is enough if he just seems like he is *thinking* about doing it. And you affirm that. You praise that. You celebrate that like the horse just did the greatest thing in the world. Then you build on that. It is a series of those small steps that eventually leads you where you want to go. It is a fact that you can only build on the positive. Sometimes there is a need for correction. But you cannot build on correction. You haven't taught that horse what to do; you have only said what *not* to do, and you can't build on that. You can only build on the positive.

In my thinking, that is a very good description of parenting. So often with parenting, we think it is about discipline and correction. I think it is primarily about teaching and training. The parent understands, *This is ultimately the behavior I want*, but the child cannot mature overnight. We don't go from nothing to that, so we break it down into little incremental steps. Then, instead of wearing negative glasses, we wear positive glasses. We are not really looking for all of the bad. We are looking for the slightest chance of movement in the right direction, and we will praise that and affirm that. We will celebrate that as a way of saying, "Yes, that is the right direction."

What about us in this process of becoming a people of faith? I will be honest with you, I wish I were a great man of faith. But I am not. I wish God would just miraculously overnight do something, so that I wake up in the morning and I am there. But God does not bypass our will, like we are some kind of a robot. He moves us through a process, where we choose to trust Him and become a people of faith. Because of that, it is a journey; it is a process. I do think I am closer today than I was a year ago. I want to be closer next year than I am today. There is still a long ways to go. How does God do that? How does he move me from here to there?

Turn with me to Genesis 30 and let's see what we can find out. We are in the midst of the story of Jacob, and in our last chapter in this story, Jacob is in the midst of a mess. He has four wives and multiple children, and the wives are competing with each other. They are mad; they are hurt; they are struggling. It is just a big mess. The last thing we are told is that Rachel finally had a son, whose name was Joseph.

With that, we pick up the story in Verse 25:

Now it came about when Rachel had borne Joseph, that Jacob said to Laban, “Send me away, that I may go to my own place and to my own country. Give me my wives and my children for whom I have served you, and let me depart; for you yourself know my service which I have rendered you.” (Vs. 25-26, *NASB)

The story opens with the first time that Jacob has ever mentioned the thought of going home. He has now been in a foreign land for fourteen years and he is ready to go home. There are a couple of things that play out here. One is that, in the ancient world, it was very important when a husband took a wife that the wife bore him children, specifically sons. If that wife, over a period of years, did not bear children, it was not at all unusual that the husband would discard the wife. At that point, the only hope she had was to go back to her family of origin and there she would live out the rest of her years. Therefore, it was considered right when a husband took a wife to stay in the vicinity of her family. Then the father knew if she did not bear children and was discarded, she could come home. It was only after that wife would have children that it was appropriate for the husband to say, “We are moving.” You can hear that in this text. Finally Rachel has a son and with that, then, Jacob feels the freedom to say, “It is time to go. It is time to go home.”

There is more to it than that. I think what you hear in Jacob’s words is a hint of faith. God has promised that He is going to bless and prosper Jacob. He is going to get him home. Jacob knows that, and I think he believes that. He is ready for that. He has served for fourteen years as a slave, basically because of his own choices. But now he is ready for better. He wants to go home. We have talked about the repetition of words in these stories. In this opening statement he repeats the word “serve” three times. He says, “I have served you, for you yourself know my service which I have served you.” The word “rendered” is the same Hebrew word. This has been the story of Jacob’s life with Laban. He has served like a slave because of his choices, but now he is ready to go home and experience God’s promise and God’s blessings.

It would also be customary in the ancient Near East when a slave was leaving the master, that the master would set the slave up with whatever was necessary for that slave to travel and establish a new home and survive. But Jacob does not even ask for that. He knows that Laban is a crook. He is a liar and a deceiver. All Jacob asks for is his family: “Give me my wife and my children and let us go.”

That in itself is another hint of a step of faith. It would be very hard for Jacob to survive and provide for his family on that journey home. But by faith God promised, and so he says to Laban, “Just give me my family and I will leave.” We have some reason to be encouraged here.

But Laban is pretty smooth, and he responds.

But Laban said to him, “If now it pleases you, stay with me; I have divined that the LORD has blessed me on your account.” He continued, “Name me your wages, and I will give it.” (vs. 27-28)

There are several things going on here. Laban wants Jacob to stay, not because he is in love with Jacob or his grandchildren, but because God has prospered him. Because Jacob is there, Laban has become a rich man. That is where Laban’s heart beats. That is what he wants.

There is a lot of discussion as to why Laban married off Leah before Rachel. Some people think it was because Leah was homely and could probably not get a husband. I do not think that is it at

all. As a matter of fact, when the text describes Leah as having “weak eyes” it is also the Hebrew word for “soft eyes.” It may very well be a compliment. The way the text reads, it says, “She had soft eyes, but Rachel was beautiful in face and form.” That really only makes sense that the writer is saying Leah was beautiful in face, but Rachel was beautiful in face and form; she was exceptional.

I don’t think there was a problem with Leah and her beauty and getting married. I think for seven years Jacob worked for Laban, and in those seven years Laban became a rich man. He is thinking to himself, *How do I keep this guy here another seven years?* He figures out a plan: *We will do the old switcheroo in the middle of the night.* He did, and his solution was, *Another seven years and you can have Rachel.* That is what he wanted. In other words, he was willing to sell out his daughters’ future happiness for seven years of prosperity. That gives you a little insight into the heart of Laban.

So now fourteen years have passed. Jacob is talking about leaving and Laban says, “I know I have become wealthy because of you.” Through the divination, he has learned that it is because of Jacob’s God.

We have talked a lot in Genesis about how important it is to notice the names of God. The Biblical writers never just throw these names around at random. The names are critical to understanding the theology. When Laban said this, the word used was *Yahweh*, capital L-O-R-D. He is saying, “I know it is the personal, covenant-keeping God you have that has made me wealthy.” How does he know that? Through the divination. We don’t know exactly what that means, but it is a reference to his idolatry, his pagan ways and his spirit worship. Somehow in the midst of that, it appears that God showed up and made it known it was Him, and Laban understands that. He does not want Jacob to go. Jacob responds:

But he said to him, “You yourself know how I have served you and how your cattle have fared with me. For you had little before I came and it has increased to a multitude, and the LORD has blessed you wherever I turned. But now, when shall I provide for my own household also?” (Vs. 29-30)

One of the things that is interesting in this text is that this is the first time where we are told that Jacob is prospering. As a matter of fact, all we have known up to this point is that Jacob is in the middle of a mess. It has all been pretty messy and pretty negative. He has gotten into this huge mess with his wives and children, and this is the first time we are told that during those fourteen years he was actually prospering. God was pouring out His blessing—to the extent that Laban, as a pagan, saw that and actually experienced the benefit of it.

That is very interesting, because we would not come out of these stories saying that Jacob was a great man of faith. We would say Jacob seems to be struggling. And yet, in the midst of that struggle, what you have is God prospering him because He promised. This prosperity is not because of Jacob’s faith. It is because of God’s faithfulness. This prosperity is not because Jacob is doing everything right. Jacob is just starting to do things right because of God’s faithfulness. In other words, God keeps pouring out His grace, revealing Himself, and little by little Jacob is seeing that. Jacob is starting to acknowledge that and he is starting to understand it. He is starting to move just a little bit in the right direction.

So Laban speaks:

So he said, “What shall I give you?” And Jacob said, “You shall not give me anything. If you will do this one thing for me, I will again pasture and keep your flock: let me pass through your entire flock today, removing from there every speckled and spotted sheep and every black one among the lambs and the spotted and speckled among the goats; and such shall be my wages. So my honesty will answer for me later, when you come concerning my wages. Every one that is not speckled and spotted among the goats and black among the lambs, if found with me, will be considered stolen.” Laban said, “Good, let it be according to your word.” So he removed on that day the striped and spotted male goats and all the speckled and spotted female goats, every one with white in it, and all the black ones among the sheep, and gave them into the care of his sons. And he put a distance of three days’ journey between himself and Jacob, and Jacob fed the rest of Laban’s flocks. (vs. 31-36)

Laban wants to keep Jacob around, so he says, “Hey, what will it take to keep you here?” Jacob says, “I don’t want anything from you.” In other words, what he is saying is, “You are a liar; you are a cheater. You can’t be trusted.” He does not want to be dependent on anything that Laban might promise to pay him. So Jacob is making an arrangement where he as the shepherd can, in a sense, be in control of his own destiny. He says, “I’ll tell you what. I will go through the sheep, and everyone that is spotted, speckled, striped and black, we will pull all of those aside. Those will be mine. Those will be my wages, and the rest will be yours.

A typical arrangement like this would have meant that the shepherd got between 10 and 20% of the animals. But in this arrangement, what Jacob would have received would have been way less than that. The percentage of the speckled and striped would have been a very low percentage. So Laban is thinking, *This is a good deal. I like this.* He says, “Good, let it be. Let it be according to your plan.” Jacob even goes so far as to say, “Laban, I am going to be in control. I will separate them out, and any time you are welcome to come and walk through these that I have claimed as my own. If any of them don’t fit the description, you can consider them stolen and you can take them home.” You can hear in these words that Jacob is still saying, “I will be in control. You just come inspect.”

Laban says, “Good, let it be done according to your word.” Then the very next thing the writer tells us is that Laban tricked him. Jacob had said, “I will go among the sheep. I will separate them out. I will do this.” But it wasn’t Jacob. Immediately Laban did it. Laban went through the sheep and he separated them out and he gave them to his sons. And they took them a three-day journey away. He probably said something to Jacob like, “I did that for you. We will keep them for you. They are a couple of hills away and we will take care of them.” Actually, what he was doing was removing the gene pool of the speckled and the striped and the black, so that those could not mate with the others. So Jacob basically had to start with all of those that were pure in color, which was a much more difficult assignment. Once again, it was Laban who had the upper hand.

Then Jacob took fresh rods of poplar and almond and plane trees, and peeled white stripes in them, exposing the white which was in the rods. He set the rods which he had peeled in front of the flocks in the gutters, even in the watering troughs, where the flocks came to drink; and they mated when they came to drink. So the flocks mated by the rods, and the flocks brought forth striped, speckled,

and spotted. Jacob separated the lambs, and made the flocks face toward the striped and all the black in the flock of Laban; and he put his own herds apart, and did not put them with Laban's flock. Moreover, whenever the stronger of the flock were mating, Jacob would place the rods in the sight of the flock in the gutters, so that they might mate by the rods; but when the flock was feeble, he did not put them in; so the feebler were Laban's and the stronger Jacob's. So the man became exceedingly prosperous, and had large flocks and female and male servants and camels and donkeys. (Vs. 37-43)

What in the world is going on here? First, let me tell you what they believed, and then let's see if we can make some sense of this. In the ancient Near East, they believed that whatever was in the viewshed of the animals when they were mating was imprinted onto the offspring. What Jacob is doing is going to the water trough where the animals would come and mate. He is trying to put everything that is striped, spotted, speckled or black in front of these animals, so they would mate while seeing this in order to produce the offspring that would then be his. Now of course there is no science to this. It is just what they believed.

Then it goes on to talk about the fact that he was basically mating the stronger for himself and the weaker for Laban, which we understand to just be genetics. That is a legitimate process. Now we come back and ask: What is the point?

It is interesting that the last verse tells us that Jacob prospered. It is interesting also that it does not give his name. It does not say "Jacob prospered" but "the man prospered"—as if the writer is making a statement there that Jacob is still acting in his own strength, but he is prospering. Why? Because he is so clever? No, because God is so faithful. As God continues to prosper him, Jacob is step by step going to learn what it means to trust God. But he's still highly dependent on his own clever schemes. He has a long way to go.

Nat: Bryan, one of the things you brought out multiple times in the series has to do with our performance and God's faithfulness. How do you balance that out? Because I know that there are some who are saying, but wait a second. I was always taught if I do these three things, God will bless me. If I do these three things, then God will punish me. How do you balance that out? Because I know that there are some who are saying, but wait a second. I was always taught if I do these three things, God will bless me. If I do these three things, then God will punish me. How do you balance that out? in, in the economy of God's grace?

Bryan: Yeah, so that's a great question. So when we sin, when we disobey, there's consequences and those consequences are real and they sometimes can be devastating. So we're not saying that our behavior doesn't matter. And it's true that God lays out the path of life. So the path that's going to bring the most joy and happiness that's going to not create unnecessary consequences is the path that God lays out. But we also have to remember, God blesses us far beyond what we deserve. And that's the whole point of grace. So oftentimes when we mess up, the problem with that if I do the right thing theology, is then when we do the wrong thing, then we think God's going to beat us up and throw us in the dark room and doesn't want to be with us, because that's the way it works in human relationships. And that's the time when we most need to remember, God's not like us, and His grace is sufficient, and He forgives, and He celebrates, and He loves us. Otherwise, it can get pretty discouraging, and we end up defining ourselves as a loser. And when that happens, then we live that way. So oftentimes, when we mess up the

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problem with that—if I do the right thing—theology, is then when we do the wrong thing, then we think God's going to beat us up and throw us in the dark room and doesn't want to be with us, because that's the way it works in human relationships. And that's the time when we most need to remember God's not like us, and His grace is sufficient, and He forgives, and He celebrates, and He loves us. Otherwise it can get pretty discouraging and we end up defining ourselves as a loser. And when that happens, then we live that way.

Nat: — And I think we have everyday ways to show this grace. We are to be grace bearers to the people around us. And one of the ways I did this at home was, my kids got into a fight. My middle son just, he clobbered my older kid. And the reality is the older one probably deserved some type of retaliation, but definitely not a punch in the face. But immediately my middle son knew what he did was wrong. And so he came, he 'fessed up to me and he said, here's what I did. And I go, well, what do you think would be the proper response? What's the proper consequence for your action? And he goes, probably a spanking. I go, you're exactly right. That's exactly what you deserve. I want you to, you know, assume the position. Went to his room, bent over, and I go, are you ready? And he goes, yep, I'm ready. Tears started coming down and I turned him around and I said, you're not going to get a spanking. And he goes, I'm not? I go, no. I go, what do you call that? And he goes, I don't know, a good day. And I go, well, you're right, it is a good day. But that's what we call mercy. So many times in my life, God withholds the discipline that I deserve. There are still some sometimes consequences, but sometimes he even holds those. And I go, I've got something else for you. And he goes, Oh, what could this be? He goes, is this the real punishment? I go, no, let's go out. We're going to get some ice cream, and he just looks at me and he goes, are you kidding me? I don't know; what do you call that? He goes, now this is a good day, a really good day. And I go, it's called grace, buddy. That's what this is. So many times, God blesses us and because of His faithfulness to us, I want you to get just a small piece of what we experience so often. And I think that's so important for us to remember, to not just receive God's grace, but also be willing to show it to other people.

Bryan: — Yeah, that's good.

Okay, this is number five, 13, and this is for April 15th.

N: (00:11)

You know, I just love old Testament stories. Laban, I mean, the only way I could describe him is he's a real piece of work, right?

B: (00:19)

You know, he's something else. He's such a schemer and a liar and a deceiver. You think about this. This is a family. These are his daughters, and he's still trying to cheat Jacob every way he can. So just imagine that this is your father in law. He's a crook and a deceiver, and he's going to do everything to take what he can to gain for himself. But also there's a reminder in the ancient world, the dynamics were just really difficult. It's not like you could get frustrated, put your house up for sale and move. It was real complicated to pull up stakes and move on. So it's a challenge for Jacob.

N: (01:01)

Hmm. You know, one of the things that really hit me in your message was the opening illustration you used—progress really is just one step at a time. I know I've seen this in my own life as God grows me in my own faith walk. I mean, I think we've probably known each other for probably going on 20 years and you've probably seen me in my best and unfortunately in my worst reality is I've actually been a Jacob, but God has been faithful time and time again. And part of that has just been that step-by-step progress.

B: (01:37)

Right! So just like that illustration of training a horse, it's one little step at a time. It's a 1200 pound animal. I can't make him do anything. But you do have to break it down into steps. And that's what God does. I think sometimes it's hard to see in ourselves because it's hard to see such slow step-by-step change and we get frustrated. I just told 'em 20 something the other day, how much I've seen him change and he got teary eyed. He's like, I just don't see that in myself, but God's busy changing us and shaping us and it's one little step at a time and God's gonna move us ahead.

N: (02:22)

And I'm thankful he does. But also as we listen to the message, I'm reminded that life is tough. And Jacob's life with Laban was certainly not easy. It's not hard to see both the selfish intent of Laban and also Jacob's poor decisions contributing to a struggle. But God keeps blessing.

B: (02:44)

Yeah, that's a really interesting part of the story because it is a mess. Jacob's a wire and a deceiver and he's made a lot of bad decisions that have gotten him to this place. Add to that Laban who's also a schemer and a liar. Now he's your father-in-law. And you'd think at some point we would see it all fall apart. And yet what the text tells us is Jacob is prospering. He's actually becoming wealthy. And it's a reminder, it's not because Jacob was so good. It's because God is so faithful.

N: (03:17)

Help out the listeners. How do we sort out the ethics of some of these old Testament stories? It gets really confusing.

B: (03:25)

It does get really confusing. So these stories are full of all kinds of bad examples, bad ethics. So these bad behaviors flow out of fear. People trying to help God. So they start manipulating and, and scheming. So I think it's helpful to realize these stories are about God primarily and God's faithfulness. So every detail in the story isn't meant to have some sort of meaning. So they're real stories, real history. So it records these people, warts and all. But that isn't the same as promoting that behavior, saying we should act like that or this is the way to raise livestock. I mean, this is the way to find a wife. I mean, that isn't the message of any of these stories. So I think it's honest. I think the characters come forth with, with the good and the bad, but in the midst of that, what is the point of the story? And it's to see God and his faithfulness and uh, and see the grace of God extended to all of us again and again.

N: (04:37)

Right. You know, it is always have to remember that there is a big idea in the text and sometimes there is a description of what we should do, or excuse me, sometimes there is a description of, of what's going on and sometimes there's a prescription, right? That's what they tell us in seminary.

B: (04:54)

Right. Well said.

N: (04:55)

Yup, exactly. Well, I hope this was helpful to you, and again, Brian, thanks for being in the studio with us.

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