

**SERIES: Unwavering Faith (Genesis Vol. 3)**

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**Message Title: Jacob Prospers Pt. 2**

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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. So 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?”** (NASB, Gen. 30:29-30)

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. He 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."

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?

You know, one of the things that we have to understand is that the writers of Scripture used a great economy of language, which means they were not real descriptive. Jacob has been a

shepherd for fourteen years and we are told nothing. Now all of a sudden we have all of these details about the speckled, spotted and striped and we think, *Who cares?* As a matter of fact, when most people are reading through the Old Testament they just skip that stuff. Why is there a lengthy discussion about that, when normally there is none at all?

There actually is a point. Do you suppose the intent of the writer is that we would read that and conclude, *Wasn't Jacob clever? Wasn't he clever the way he ripped off Laban?* I mean, there are some integrity issues here, aren't there? The right thing would have been to have just shepherded the flock, let the offspring fall as they may and trust God with that. But this goes back to Jacob's old ways of scheming and in his own plan trying somehow to manipulate the circumstances to his favor. I am sure he could justify the fact that Laban was a crook (and he was), therefore it justified what he was doing. Certainly that is not what God wanted.

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 ways to go.

When we read through a Hebrew narrative like this, there are two kinds of characters. One is called a flat character. A flat character is one that is always the same. It is predictable and never changes. Laban is a flat character. In every one of these stories he is a liar, a deceiver. He is a manipulator and a schemer. Nothing changes, because that is Laban.

But Jacob is what we call a round character, which means there is some fullness to his character. He is growing and changing. He is becoming. And what he is becoming is a person of faith. But they are not huge steps. They are just little steps. It is time to go home. God has prospered him. Even his step of faith with Laban was just that. God would somehow have to intervene and provide for Jacob.

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Any time we read a story like this, one of the big questions we have to ask is: What is God trying to teach us about Himself through the telling of this story? In other words, these are never just historical records of what happened. This is God very intentionally telling us a story to teach us something about Himself.

What do we learn about God in this story? If you go back the last several chapters to this whole story of Jacob so far, we would say Jacob is not a great man of faith. He is struggling; he has made a lot of poor choices and he lives with the consequences of those choices. Show me one place in this story line where the writer tells us, "And God was angry at Jacob. God poured out his wrath on Jacob. God thought Jacob was hopeless, threw up his hands and said, 'Why did I pick this loser?'" There isn't even the slightest hint of that.

As a matter of fact, what we consistently get is just the opposite—this continual record of God prospering Jacob. Not because of the greatness of Jacob, but because of the faithfulness of God. As God continues to reveal Himself as a faithful God who keeps His promises, Jacob is learning, and little by little there seems to be movement in the right direction. God is affirming and honoring that. God is revealing the view of Himself that, "I am not an angry, wrathful,

judgmental God with My children. I am a God who wants to see you succeed. I want to see you become a person of faith.”

He is a gentle trainer. He is a loving father. He patiently continues to do what is necessary that we might take even the littlest steps of faith. When we take even the littlest step of faith, God celebrates that. He affirms that. He says, “Yes, that is what I wanted. Now take another one... now take another one...now take another one.”

If you believe that God is this angry, wrathful, judgmental God, you will never have the courage to walk by faith. You will be paralyzed by your fear that if you mess up God is going to clobber you. That is not the picture God paints of Himself. It is just the opposite. In the New Testament, under the New Covenant, it is through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, that we believe by faith, God even puts the very Spirit of Jesus within us to empower us, lead us, and guide us, that we might become what He has called us to be. He so wants us to succeed that He put His very life in us, that He will do through us what we cannot do ourselves. He is determined to see us succeed as a people of faith. That is what God wants, so He pours out His grace and His blessing. Sometimes, when all He gets from us is just even the *thought* of a step in the right direction, He celebrates and He says, “Way to go!”

If that is true of God and how God encourages us on our faith walk, shouldn’t that be true of how we encourage one another? Sometimes we look at one another as if we are supposed to become giants of faith overnight. We look at our failures and we look at our poor choices. We roll our eyes and we put on very critical glasses. It is as if nobody is doing it right.

We can’t build on the negative. There is nothing to build with. Wouldn’t it be a better thing if we understood in our mind what this faith journey looks like? Instead of wearing negative glasses, what would happen if we put on positive glasses? Instead of always looking to criticize, we are just watching for the slightest hint of movement in the right direction. And when we see it, we celebrate it; we affirm it. We say, “Yes, that was it. Great step!” And that person might take another one... and another one...and another one—because we build on the positive.

I would challenge each of you to think of three very specific people in your lives. It might be one of your children. It might be all of your children. It might be a classmate or friend. It might be your spouse or a parent. It might be a work associate. Imagine in your mind, what just a little step of faith would look like in that person’s life.

This week, instead of wearing your negative glasses that just see the failures and the things that need to be corrected, what if you wore positive glasses and you very intentionally watch? When you see just the slightest movement in the right direction, you celebrate that—as if that person has just crossed the Red Sea with Moses. You say, “Yes! Yes, that was it! That was a great step of faith.” With that encouragement, they might take another step...and another step...and another step—until they’re taking the journey.

That is how God parents us. And that is how God moves us down this path to becoming a people of faith. If that is how God parents us, shouldn’t that be the way we encourage one another in this journey of faith?

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Nat: I love that Bryan. I've seen the power of positive encouragement with my own kids. It's just so easy to dwell on the negative, isn't it?

Bryan: It is. It absolutely is. We do it to ourselves. We tend to do it to the people around us. We do it to people at church, and I just think you have to intentionally choose to treat others the way God treats us. Spend more time celebrating the positive and celebrating steps in the right direction. Even like that illustration with the horse yesterday, even if it looks like the horse is thinking about doing the right thing, you celebrate that and I've found that works with kids and it works with the people around me, so yeah. Cheer for progress in the right direction.

Nat: I think in one of the messages you gave years ago, you talked about grace-based parenting. And one of the concepts you taught was asking questions to gain understanding, versus simply trying to just correct and discipline, but rather, trying to gain understanding to find out what's going on really, that's causing their behavior.

Bryan: Right. I tell parents of teenagers, make it a rule that you'll always ask 10 questions before you give a lecture.

Nat: And that's proved very, very helpful in our household. But it's also, I recognize likely, that some of our listeners are probably very discouraged today. They want to trust God and they want to sincerely walk by faith, but it's hard. How does the story of Jacob offer them hope today?

Bryan: Yeah. So it is easy to get discouraged. I'm sure that's true. So in the story, you see God's patience. You see God's grace. God's not waiting to clobber us. He wants us to succeed. He wants us to get it. You see God's faithfulness. You see God moving Jacob one step at a time. You know, it's a good reminder that no failure is final. We need to keep getting up and moving forward and trust that God tells the truth. He is gracious and kind and He loves us. So you know, a good question at this point in the story, does Jacob seem like a Hall of Famer to you? It's like, no, but he is. He's going to end up there. So we need to trust God to do the same with us.

Bryan: Nat I've known you for many years and watched you grow into a man of faith, a man that I respect a great deal. So maybe share with the listeners a little bit of your own story.

Nat: Yeah. Right. How much time do we have? You know, I was raised in a Christian home and I would probably say in some regards, under a fundamentalist background, right? These are the dos and these are the don'ts. I think I had a good understanding of, who I think, who God was, and what he expected, but unfortunately, it kind of puts you into a negative mindset and a corner in that lifestyle. But over time, I came into my faith. My early twenties were a lot like a lot of early 20 somethings nowadays, where there's a time of rebellion and working out, what is it that I really believe? But I would say around 25 or so, life seemed to finally come together. And I remember sitting down with you about that time, asking you some hard questions about faith and about calling. And I started realizing, you know, I think God is going to use me in ministry at some point. And it took over 10 years to get to that point. At times, I was a lot like Jacob. I was waiting. I knew He could use me, and I felt like there was something greater that I would be involved in. Sometimes I ran ahead of God. Sometimes I've manipulated the situation. Sometimes I called you to find a way out. But God, all the time, was faithful. And as they say, the rest is history. And God, by His grace, has gotten me into a place where He's using me in a new light. But it definitely was a journey and definitely was not perfect.

Bryan: Well, it's exciting to see what God's done in your life.

Nat: Absolutely. I'm very thankful. I think this was really helpful today, Bryan. Thank you for your time.