

SERIES: Unwavering Faith (Genesis Vol. 3)

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Message Title: A Tense Parting Pt. 1

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One of the most vivid images in my mind is seeing people by the hundreds or thousands flocking to Hindu temples to worship these gods of concrete, and all around these temples there are people living lives of such hopelessness and despair. You'd think eventually these people would look around and realize their gods are doing *nothing* for them. At first I think, *How could these people believe that?*

Then I come home, back to the West, and I realize we're just not that much different. Oh, we're a little bit more sophisticated. We don't worship a god of concrete; we worship a god of metal—like a car. Or the god of pleasure. Or the god of power and position and popularity. Our culture has its own gods. But it's the same: believing that somehow these gods will make us happy and will satisfy our lives.

Perhaps the most powerful of all of the gods of the West would be the god of money. I've noticed over the years that people seem very responsive to almost anything we talk about—no matter how personal it is. We can talk about sexual immorality; we can talk about selfishness; we can talk about pride; we can talk about fear. And people say, "Oh, that was such a good sermon. Just appreciate your preaching the Word." Until we talk about money, and then it's like, *Whoa*. We cross the line here where suddenly people don't want to hear it. *All we ever talk about is money*. Why is that? Why do we have that response?

I think it's because of what Jesus said: "Where your treasure is, that's where your heart is." We don't like to be exposed. There's probably nothing that exposes our value system as clearly as what we do with our money, and we don't like to be exposed.

But it's more than that. It's ultimately an issue of faith. It comes down to really processing whether or not I trust God, or whether I'm going to say, "God, You can't be trusted. I'm going to do this myself." It's not really possible to say, "God, I trust You," but not trust Him with your money. That's another way of saying, "God, I just don't trust You." And there are consequences to those choices.

Our story of Jacob today reminds us that there are consequences to trusting God and to trusting ourselves. And we have to decide: What will it be for *us*? Turn with me to Genesis 31 as we continue our study in the life of Jacob. We want to get through 55 verses today, so there are a lot of little details that we will not talk about. Instead we will try to focus our attention on the big idea—the main theology God wants us to understand from the telling of this story. We're going to break it into three chunks.

The first one is in Verses 1-21:

Now Jacob heard the words of Laban's sons, saying, "Jacob has taken away all that was our father's, and from what belonged to our father he has made all this wealth." Jacob saw the attitude of Laban, and behold, it was not friendly toward him as formerly. Then the LORD said to Jacob, "Return to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you."

So Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah to his flock in the field, and said to them, "I see your father's attitude, that it is not friendly toward me as formerly, but the God of my father has been with me. You know that I have served your father with all my strength. Yet your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times; however, God did not allow him to hurt me. If he spoke thus, 'The speckled shall be your wages,' then all the flock brought forth speckled; and if he spoke thus, 'The striped shall be your wages,' then all the flock brought forth striped. Thus God has taken away your father's livestock and given them to me.

And it came about at the time when the flock were mating that I lifted up my eyes and saw in a dream, and behold, the male goats which were mating were striped, speckled and mottled. Then the angel of God said to me in the dream, 'Jacob,' and I said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Lift up now your eyes and see that all the male goats which are mating are striped, speckled, and mottled; for I have seen all that Laban has been doing to you. I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar, where you made a vow to Me; now arise, leave this land, and return to the land of your birth.'"

Rachel and Leah said to him, "Do we still have any portion or inheritance in our father's house? Are we not reckoned by him as foreigners? For he has sold us, and has also entirely consumed our purchase price. Surely all the wealth which God has taken away from our father belongs to us and our children; now then, do whatever God has said to you." Then Jacob arose and put his children and his wives upon camels; and he drove away all his livestock and all his property which he had gathered, his acquired livestock which he had gathered in Paddan-aram, to go to the land of Canaan to his father Isaac.

When Laban had gone to shear his flock, then Rachel stole the household idols that were her father's. And Jacob deceived Laban the Aramean, by not telling him that he was fleeing. So he fled with all that he had; and he arose and crossed the Euphrates River, and set his face toward the hill country of Gilead. (*NASB)

Now, we know that Laban lived for his wealth. He sold out his daughters' happiness for wealth. He continually cheated his son-in-law Jacob for wealth. He would literally sell his soul for wealth. And there was a time where it appeared his cheating and his manipulating and his scheming was working. But over time God has taken away everything that was Laban's and He has given it to Jacob. It isn't just that Jacob is prospering; the text is very clear that it's being taken away from Laban and it's being given to Jacob.

Well, Laban's sons see this. Their inheritance is slowly being lost to Jacob. They're not happy with that and there's great tension. The Lord appears to Jacob and says, "It's time to go. It's time to go home." He makes the great statement in Verse 3, "I will be with you." Now this is what God promised 20 years earlier when He met him at Bethel. He promised, "I'll be with you."

But Jacob has struggled to understand what that means. I think Jacob believed that; he just doesn't understand what that really means—that God is with him. But he's starting to understand it. There are some key statements in this text. In Verse 5 he says, "The God of my father has been with me." Again in Verse 7: "God did not allow him to hurt me"—even though Laban was trying to cheat him. Verse 9: "Thus God has taken away your father's livestock and given them to me." Jacob is understanding what God is doing on his behalf.

And then the critical verse, Verse 13, when God speaks to Jacob and says, "I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar, where you made a vow to Me." It's interesting that at this time, God comes to Jacob and takes him back 20 years earlier. Remember Jacob was fleeing for his life because Esau wanted to kill him. He was filled with fear, and God appeared to him in the night and said, "I will be your God and I will protect you. And I will provide for you and I will be with you. If you just believe that."

And Jacob believed. He made a vow and he set up this pillar. He said, "God, I believe! I trust You that You will be with me and You'll provide for me and You'll be my God. Therefore I give You a tithe." That's what God is going back to. That was Jacob's demonstration of belief: "I trust You." At that time Jacob had nothing. By now he has great wealth.

Do you remember the importance of the stone? The stone in Genesis 28 was the stone that Jacob put by his head. That was his protection in the middle of the night, in case Esau found him and tried to kill him. But as God promised to be Jacob's protector, he took that same stone and he anointed it and said, "This is now my marker that will remind me that it's *God* who is my protector. It is *God* who is my provider.

The stone is used in the next chapter, though, to indicate that Jacob still doesn't understand what that means. We find him trying to wrestle that big stone off the well so that Rachel can water her sheep, and it's a picture of Jacob still trying to do it himself.

But now 20 years have passed and Jacob is learning what it means that God will be with him—that God will be his protector and his provider. And he's growing. So he talks to Rachel and Leah. Rachel and Leah for the first time express their bitterness that their father sold them out, and they're angry with him. Typically when a father received money for the bride, he would put it in some sort of an account and it would be their inheritance someday. But they said, "That's gone. He spent it." So they have no reason to stay. *Let's go!*

So in the middle of the night, because of fear, Jacob deceives Laban and hits the road. And then we're told that Rachel goes into the tent of Laban and steals his gods. (We'll come back to that in just a moment.)

Verse 22:

When it was told Laban on the third day that Jacob had fled, then he took his kinsmen with him, and pursued him a distance of seven days' journey; and he overtook him in the hill country of Gilead. God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream of the night and said to him, "Be careful that you do not speak to Jacob either good or bad." Laban caught up with Jacob. Now Jacob had pitched his tent

in the hill country, and Laban with his kinsmen camped in the hill country of Gilead. Then Laban said to Jacob, “What have you done by deceiving me and carrying away my daughters like captives of the sword? Why did you flee secretly and deceive me, and did not tell me so that I might have sent you away with joy and with songs, with timbrel and with lyre; and did not allow me to kiss my sons and my daughters? Now you have done foolishly. It is in my power to do you harm, but the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying, ‘Be careful not to speak either good or bad to Jacob.’ Now you have indeed gone away because you longed greatly for your father’s house; but why did you steal my gods?”

Then Jacob replied to Laban, “Because I was afraid, I thought that you would take your daughters from me by force. The one with whom you find your gods shall not live; in the presence of our kinsmen point out what is yours among my belongings and take it for yourself.” For Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen them. So Laban went into Jacob’s tent and into Leah’s tent and into the tent of the two maids, but he did not find them. Then he went out of Leah’s tent and entered Rachel’s tent. Now Rachel had taken the household idols and put them in the camel’s saddle, and she sat on them. And Laban felt through all the tent but did not find them. She said to her father, “Let not my lord be angry that I cannot rise before you, for the manner of women is upon me.” So he searched but did not find the household idols.

Then Jacob became angry and contended with Laban; and Jacob said to Laban, “What is my transgression? What is my sin that you have hotly pursued me? Though you have felt through all my goods, what have you found of all your household goods? Set it here before my kinsmen and your kinsmen, that they may decide between us two. These twenty years I have been with you; your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried, nor have I eaten the rams of your flocks. That which was torn of beasts I did not bring to you; I bore the loss of it myself. You required it of my hand whether stolen by day or stolen by night. Thus I was: by day the heat consumed me and the frost by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes. These twenty years I have been in your house; I served you fourteen years for your two daughters and six years for your flock, and you changed my wages ten times. If the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the fear of Isaac, had not been for me, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. God has seen my affliction and the toil of my hands, so He rendered judgment last night.” (Vs. 22-42)

Well, Laban hears word that Jacob has fled, and they go on a chase. Because they’re unencumbered it doesn’t take long to catch them. And of course we’re expecting a very tense encounter when Laban enters the camp. But before Laban can enter the camp of Jacob, God intervenes. And God gets in Laban’s face and says, “That’s far enough.” Basically, that’s a Hebrew phrase that means, “Just leave him alone; you can’t touch him.”

So Laban goes into the camp (being the politician he is) and says, “Why have you done this? We wanted to give you a party! I wanted to kiss my daughters and my grandchildren. We wanted to have timbrel and lyre.” He should have said, “I’m a big liar!” [Laughter] I’m guessing both Laban’s people and Jacob’s people all knew this was a bunch of baloney, and they’re all kind of rolling their eyes.

And then he gets to this line: “Why have you stolen my gods?” Well, Jacob knows nothing of that. He doesn’t like the accusation. He says, “Search our stuff! If you find them, we’ll kill whoever took them.” So Laban searches through the stuff and he comes into Rachel’s tent. Rachel has taken the gods and she has put them in the camel bags and she’s sitting on them. She says, “I can’t get up, because the manner of woman is upon me.” It means she’s having her period. Ladies, you might remember that if sometime your husband says, “Honey, how come you’re so crabby?”—just say, “Well, the manner of woman is upon me.” [Laughter] It makes it sound kind of noble. [Laughter] We’ll get back to this in just a minute. [Laughter]

Laban finds nothing. And that’s just about all Jacob needs. He finally says what he has probably wanted to say for 20 years and he lays it all out, “Laban, what’s your problem? What have we done? What is our sin? I have bent over backwards to be a person of integrity. You changed my wages ten times. You’ve tried everything you could try to cheat me. What have I done?”

Then he makes that great statement in Verse 42: “If the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the fear of Isaac [*could be translated “the awesome one of Isaac”*], had not been for me, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed.” You see, Jacob has understood what it means when God says, “I will be with you. I will protect you. I will provide for you.” Jacob now realizes that this was not something he could do for himself. Were it not for God, he would have walked away empty-handed. Instead, he walks away a very wealthy man—because God was with him.

Nat: So Jacob is learning to trust God, isn't he? I mean this is probably the most impressive picture of Jacob so far.

Bryan: Yeah, I'd agree. I think it is. And you do get the sense he's getting it. He's saying the right words. He's seeing God's hand in what's been happening. He seems clear what Laban was trying to do and what God has actually done. So it's been a long, hard 20 years. But it does seem like he's changing.

Nat: Yeah. You're celebrating for Jacob. And then this is kind of when we realize how wounded Laban's daughters are because of their father's actions. I mean, sadly I've seen in my own ministry, you've seen in your ministry, these father wounds are really far too common.

Bryan: They are far too common. It's interesting. This is the first time you really get a sense of how these daughters feel. You kind of think in these stories, they just roll along and nobody's feeling anything, but it's like they're really hurt and they're really angry, and it just reminds me of these father wounds that I deal with all the time. I meet people in their fifties and sixties and seventies, who are still driven by deep father wounds that have never been addressed, or have never been healed. It's a significant issue.

Nat: Right. And I think you've probably read the book, *The Making of an Atheist* by James Spiegel, but one of the things he brings out in his book is that how we view our fathers has a dramatic impact on how we view God.

Bryan: Yeah, absolutely. I think God intended it that way, but when things at home go poorly, then you know, what's powerful for good becomes powerful for hurt and bad.

Nat: Right. Absolutely. You know, one of the things that the story brought up in my mind is that sometimes it seems like the wicked do bad things and they just get away with it. I mean, time and time again, you see it. So Bryan, would you say that this story reminds us that God was not only blessing Jacob, but also judging Laban?

Bryan: Yeah, this is one of the stories where it's more clearly spelled out that God was taking from Laban and giving to Jacob. So there's clearly a judgment in that and Jacob seems to be aware of what God is doing. So no matter how much Laban deceives and schemes and manipulates, Jacob's winning and Laban is losing. It kind of reminds me of Psalm 73, where Asaph looks at the righteous, their kids die, they get sick, everything falls apart. And he's really struggling with, where's God in all that? Because it seems like the wicked prosper and the wicked get away with everything. But the Psalm ends with him remembering that at the end of the story, God sorts it out, and God wins, and His people win, and evil doesn't prosper. And you have to trust God with that.

Nat: Yep, I am very thankful that God is in charge and I am not. Well, I think you've given us a lot to think about. So thanks again, Bryan, for being in studio with us.