

SERIES: Unwavering Faith (Genesis Vol. 3)

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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.” (NASB, Gen 31:22-42)

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.

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.” 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.

Now Jacob is still struggling with issues of fear. We’ve seen throughout this story that the contrast of faith is fear. He didn’t need to leave in the middle of the night like this. But he said,

“I was afraid.” The story makes it obvious that *God* was protecting Jacob. He would have intervened, just as He did.

The story goes on (Verse 43):

Then Laban replied to Jacob, “The daughters are my daughters, and the children are my children, and the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine. But what can I do this day to these my daughters or to their children whom they have borne? [Laban knows that he is defeated. He’s just trying to save face here. What he’s really trying to do is cut a deal to get Jacob out of his life, because he knows he can’t win.]

So now come, let us make a covenant, you and I, and let it be a witness between you and me.” Then Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar. And Jacob said to his kinsmen, “Gather stones.” So they took stones and made a heap, and they ate there by the heap. Now Laban called it Jegar-sahadutha, but Jacob called it Galeed [both those words mean “a heap of stones.”]. Laban said, “This heap is a witness between you and me this day.” Therefore it was named Galeed, and Mizpah [it means “watchtower”], for he said, “May the LORD watch between you and me when we are absent one from the other. If you mistreat my daughters, or if you take wives besides my daughters, although no man is with us, see, God is witness between you and me.” [Just a comment on that “covenant of Mizpah,” as it’s often referred to. I know a number of people have this inscribed in their wedding ring. I see it on lockets at the bookstore. It’s very romantic: “May God see between you and me.” But you have to understand, this is a covenant made between two people that hate each other. And basically this is what the covenant is: “We hate each other and we don’t trust each other, so we’re making a deal here. God is witness that if you try to cheat me or I try to cheat you, God is going to get you.” So I wouldn’t want it on my wedding ring.] [Laughter]

Laban said to Jacob, “Behold this heap and behold the pillar which I have set between you and me. This heap is a witness, and the pillar is a witness, that I will not pass by this heap to you for harm, and you will not pass by this heap and this pillar to me, for harm. The God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge between us.” So Jacob swore by the fear of his father Isaac.

Then Jacob offered a sacrifice on the mountain, and called his kinsmen to the meal; and they ate the meal and spent the night on the mountain. Early in the morning Laban arose, and kissed his sons and his daughters and blessed them. Then Laban departed and returned to his place. (Vs. 43-55)

Jacob and Laban make a deal, and it’s symbolized by this pile of stones. Basically what it becomes is a national boundary. This is the line: *Laban, you stay on your side of the line; and Jacob will stay on his side of the line*—because Laban knows he can’t win. He just wants Jacob gone.

Well, what is the point of the story? What does God want us to walk away with? I think it’s a contrast between the gods of Laban and the God of Jacob. The gods of Laban are so powerful

that Rachel steals them out of the tent and sticks them in the saddlebag. She gets them in the tent, and when Laban comes looking, she puts them in the saddlebag and she sits on them. Now whether it was true or not that she was at that time of the month, a Hebrew reader would have heard that as this woman being unclean, sitting on these gods. That's the ultimate insult! It's a way of saying, "These gods are *nothing*. They're an embarrassment."

That is contrasted with the God of Jacob who said 20 years ago, "I will be with you. I'll protect you; I'll provide for you; I will be with you." And now through this story Jacob is saying, "This has all happened because God is with me. And no matter how hard Laban tried to cheat me, God has taken away from Laban and He has given it to me."

This is a God who actually speaks to Jacob, who leads him and directs him. This is a God who, when Laban was coming to do harm to Jacob, intervened and got in Laban's face and said, "You can't! You can't touch him; he's My guy." This is a God who is real and alive and powerful...contrasted with this pathetic god of Laban.

Jacob is learning, *This is what it means when God says, "I will be with you."* But it was God Himself in this text who took it back to the vow Jacob made 20 years before, when he said, "God, I believe You. I trust You. And my response of trust is, I give my tithe back to you." And Jacob has prospered.

To put it in the language of the New Covenant in the New Testament, through Jesus Christ the promises made to Jacob are the same promises made to us: "I will be with you. I will protect you. I will provide for you. Just trust Me." And that trust is made evident by our willingness to give back to God.

It is not possible to say, "God, I trust You," and not trust Him with our money. Somewhere there's a breakdown. What we're saying is, "God, You can't be trusted." Ultimately, we either say, "God, I trust You, and this is my response of trust." Or we say, "God, this is an area of my life where You cannot be trusted; therefore I'm going to do it myself. I'm going to be my own provider." God says, "Okay." And we really need to ask ourselves, *Do we want to live with that choice?*

Anytime we take a step of faith, there is risk. I understand that. There are many of you who would say, "I can't afford to give"—because there is risk in giving. But I would say that you can't afford *not* to give, because the only thing riskier than giving is to *not* give. Do you really want to say to God, "I'll do it myself. I'll be my own provider. I'll take care of myself"? That's what Laban said. Laban lied and cheated and manipulated, and ultimately he was going to do it himself. And God took it all away from Laban, and He gave it to Jacob.

It would be very interesting if we could have all the people who, over the years, have given a tithe, come up here and talk about what kind of financial predicament they are in. I bet you would find by and large that they're all doing pretty well. But if we brought up all those people who have *not* given, or they just give one or two or three percent, and talk to them about their financial stress and their financial predicament, I bet it would be a mess—a horror story.

Are you seeing what's happening here? There are those people who have said, "God, I trust You. You're my provider and I demonstrate that in my willingness to give." And God has provided. And there are those who have said to God, "God, you can't be trusted with this area of

my life. I'm going to do it myself." And He has said, "Okay." And they're living with the consequences of those choices.

I've never yet had anybody who gives a tithe come back and say, "I regret that. I wish I never would have done that." As a matter of fact, I have had people come up and say, "Since we've crossed that line, we would never go back—to that stress of feeling like you're in charge and you have to provide for yourself and all that goes with that—but rather to give it to God and say, 'God, You're my provider,' and to have peace. We would *never* go back."

Each of us has to make our own decision. There is a line in the sand, and as a person of faith you're going to have to decide. You can decide: *God, I believe You and I trust You. I'm going to demonstrate that by my response of giving back to You as my way of saying that You're my provider and I trust You.* Or you can decide: *God, You just can't be trusted. I'll do it myself.*

I just want you to understand: *you will live with the consequences of that choice.*

Our Father, You are such a faithful God. Lord, the story of Jacob just reminds us that You are the Great Provider. Had Jacob trusted in himself, he would have walked away with nothing. But he believed You when You said You would be his protector and provider, and he walked away a very wealthy man. Lord, ultimately it's not about our wealth; it's about our trust. It's about whether or not we really believe You when You say You will be with us and will provide for us. Lord, help us to be a people of faith. In Jesus name, Amen.

Nat: Bryan, it is easy to say that we trust God, but what we do with our money really tells the story, doesn't it?

Bryan: I think it does. Martin Luther once said that most Christians go through three conversions: a conversion of the head, conversion of the heart, and conversion of the pocketbook. And my experience as a pastor is, it's easy to *say* that I trust God. If you don't trust God with your money, you don't *really* trust Him. Jesus said that where your treasure is, that's where your heart is. So, I think it's a very practical way to assess, do I trust God to be my provider? And that's the lesson Jacob's learning.

Nat: Yeah. And I think it's something we can all relate to and have struggled with in the past. So that contrast in the story between the gods of Laban and the God of Jacob, it's really powerful.

Bryan: It is powerful. It's almost humorous in the way it's presented in the text. But a good question would be, well, which God would you choose? That's kind of how it's presented. So there's this powerless god or gods of Laban and what happens to them is almost humorous. That's positioned up against the God of Jacob, who has actually been doing something. He's been dealing with Laban. He's been prospering Jacob. He's been intervening; He's been leading. It's like this isn't some religious wishful thinking. This is a real God with causal power and He's actually making things happen. So the contrast is pretty dramatic.

Nat: Yeah, as I read that, I thought it was kind of humorous to think about even our own lives

though. I mean, we can, we know we've got the one true God, He is our Heavenly Father, but yet we turn to all sorts of mini-gods, don't we?

Bryan: We do. We turn a lot of things in our life into idols that seem to be substitutes or replacements for God, but they don't do anything. They can't do what the one true God can do.

Nat: Right. Yup. Yet again, I can relate and we can relate to the story. But here, Jacob has been away from home now for 20 years. I mean that's a long time, and his life has been hard, and it's been filled with ups and it's been filled with downs. But he is returning home a different man now, isn't he?

Bryan: I think he is. I think sometimes in these Old Testament stories, we just lose track of how much time has passed. A lot of very everyday mundane, boring, hard, discouraging things have happened. But I think Jacob has changed and I think he's going back home a different man and he's seeing God's hand in his story and it's been a long, hard road, but that's how it works.

Nat: And I think it's important that we remember, sometimes in our lives, when there is such a gap between maybe the thing we want, and the time it takes for that reality, that's not wasted time. God is using that to develop us.

Bryan: Yes, we want to change overnight, but it just doesn't work that way.

Nat: There are no silver bullets. Well, I think you've given me a lot to think about, and I know you've given our listeners a lot to think about. Thanks Bryan.