

Genesis Ch31v1-55 - Longing For Home

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[0 : 00] Come and read this morning Genesis 31. So it's Genesis chapter 31 verse 17.

Then Jacob put his children and his wives on camels, and he drove all his livestock ahead of him, along with all the goods he had accumulated in Paddan Haram.

To go to his father Isaac in the land of Canaan. When Laban had gone to shear his sheep, Rachel stole her father's household gods.

Moreover, Jacob deceived Laban the Aramean by not telling him he was running away. So he fled with all he had, crossed the river Euphrates, and headed for the hill country of Gilead.

On the third day, Laban was told that Jacob had fled. Taking his relatives with him, he pursued Jacob for seven days, and caught up with him in the hill country of Gilead.

[1 : 38] Then God came to Laban, the Aramean, in a dream at night, and said to him, Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.

Jacob had pitched his tent in the hill country of Gilead, when Laban overtook him. And Laban and his relatives camped there too.

Then Laban said to Jacob, What have you done? You've deceived me, and you've carried off my daughters like captives in war. Why did you run off secretly and deceive me?

Why didn't you tell me so that I could send you away with joy and singing to the music of tambourines and harps? You didn't even let me kiss my grandchildren and my daughters goodbye. You have done a foolish thing. I have the power to harm you. But last night, the God of your father said to me, Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.

[2 : 38] Now you have gone off, because you longed to return to your father's household. But why did you steal my gods? Jacob answered Laban, I was afraid, because I thought you would take your daughters away from me by force.

But if you find anyone who has your gods, that person shall not live. In the presence of our relatives, see for yourself whether there is anything of yours here with me.

And if so, take it. Now Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen the gods. Thank you, Sarah.

Please follow along in your Bibles. We're going to be starting in chapter 30, verse 25 in a minute, just so you can have it prepared and open.

Just as a reminder, all the talks are recorded. Normally I'm thanking Ralph. It's actually Christopher who does that. So thank you, Chris, for putting everything online for us week by week.

[3 : 49] We appreciate it. So you can catch up on any of the talks that you've missed as we look at the life of Jacob. We're going to pray and ask for God's help to us now.

So let's pray. Father, in all of life, we need your help.

And we thank you that you are a good, faithful and generous God who gives to us as we need. And so our need is for your Holy Spirit.

For you to be present working in our lives individually and together as a church family. That you will bring reassurance to us today.

That you will bring words of comfort and rich encouragement. As we walk our journey and our life with you.

[5 : 03] So please help us. Amen.

Well, Jacob wants to go home. Look at chapter 30, verse 25. After Rachel gave birth to Joseph, Jacob said to Laban, Send me on my way so that I can go back to my own homeland.

14 years ago, Jacob had to leave his home in a hurry. Having deceived his father Isaac and cheated on his brother Esau, he was running for his life.

Now all these years later, with two wives, 11 sons and one daughter, he wants to go home. Of course, this is much more than a longing for just some of mum's homebake or a catch up with old

friends.

This is a story, a true story about God getting Jacob home to the promised land. Because God's plan is always to have God's people in God's place, enjoying God's presence.

[6 : 22] But there's a problem. There's always a problem, isn't there? Laban, his uncle, doesn't want to let Jacob go.

Verse 27. Laban said to him, If I found favour in your eyes, please stay. I mean, look at all that you have here, Jacob. Please stay with me.

Well, Jacob refuses. He wants to go home. So Laban takes out his wallet and flashes the cash.

Verse 31. What shall I give you?

He asked. You name your price, whatever it is. I'll give it to you just so you can stay. Well, look at Jacob's response.

Verse 31. Don't give me anything, Jacob replied. But if you will do this one thing for me, I will go on tending your flocks and watching over them.

[7 : 19] Let me go through all your flocks today and remove from them every speckled or spotted sheep, every dark-coloured lamb and every spotted or speckled goat. They will be my wages.

Well, it seems old Jacob has got distracted again with the idea of gaining a little bit more economic security. His heart has been turned once again.

The two things that Jacob was attracted to when he first arrived to his uncle was Rachel and all the flocks she was tending. Now, all these years later, he has Rachel and now he has the flocks.

But it comes at a cost, doesn't it? Because this deal with Laban turns out to be another six long years. It seems Jacob's wandering heart means he's never going to get to the promised land.

He's always distracted with something else. He's a bit like us. We have wandering hearts and we get distracted with all that God has for us and we're so focused on the here and now.

[8 : 40] But when does God ever fail to deliver on his promises? Well, the truth is, in the midst of it all, God will ensure that Jacob gets home.

And as we follow along with Jacob in his journey, we'll see that God gives to his people reassurances. God reminds us that he is faithful and God will always bring his people home. Home not to where we were born or where we grew up, but home to that ultimate land, heaven itself, the new creation. And despite all our wanderings and all of our distractions, God will get you home.

So we're going to see four assurances that God gives to his people as we journey with him. Very simple.

Number one, God's presence in our doubts. Let's turn to chapter 31. Verse 2.

[9 : 54] Jacob noticed that Laban's attitude towards him was not what it had been. There's become this tension between them. Verse 3. The Lord said to Jacob, Go back to the land of your fathers and to your relatives.

Go back to the promised land. Now notice that this command comes with a promise. Look at the end of verse 3. And I will be with you.

God has been with Jacob all along, but Jacob needs that reassurance to hear God say to him, Jacob, I'm with you.

Everything you need will be found in me. And this call of God to go back to the promised land includes his whole family. So Jacob gets Rachel and Leah together for a family chat and he tells them what God revealed to him in a dream.

So what we have in verse 3 is now repeated in verse 13. Have a look at verse 13. As Jacob recalls all that God had said to him.

[11 : 07] Verse 13. God said to Jacob, I am the God of Bethel where you anointed a pillar and where you made a vow to me.

Now leave this land at once and go back to your native land. Remember, Jacob, I want you to think back to when you were on the run from your brother.

Remember how I came to you, how I intervened in your life. Do you remember Bethel, Jacob? Do you remember what I said to you then? Well, in case we can't remember, let's go back to chapter 28, verse 15.

This is when Jacob was running from his brother and God comes to him. Chapter 28, verse 15.

And listen to what God says. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go and I will bring you back to this land.

[12:15] I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you. When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, surely the Lord is in this place.

And I was not aware of it. That's my promise, Jacob. I'm going to get you home no matter where you may go or no matter what will happen in your life.

I am going to be with you and I'm not going to leave you until I get you back to the promised land. Let's go back to chapter 31.

Verse 17. So with God's clear command and God's reassuring promise, Jacob now gets ready to return home.

Verse 17. Jacob put his children and his wives on camels and he drove all his livestock ahead of him along with all the goods he had accumulated in Padan Aram to go to his father Isaac in the land of Canaan.

[13:23] The promised land. Now isn't that the kind of word we all need to hear? The God who calls you into a relationship with you is the God who will be with you.

He doesn't do things in half measure. If he calls you, he'll keep you and he'll bring you home. Like the writer of Psalm 139 we can say, where can I go from your spirit?

Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you're there. If I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me and your hand will hold me fast.

Isn't that what we need to know in the midst of our trials and struggles? That we are in the hand of one who holds us fast. He calls us and he'll bring us home.

But sometimes it seems that God's presence is not enough. Oh yeah, God is with me but I need, well, as in the case of Rachel, look at verse 19, when Laban, her uncle, had gone to shear his sheep so this was kind of a big exercise that could take up to three days to shear all their sheep and he's gone off with the men.

[15:01] Rachel stole her father's household gods. Now an idol is anything we can put in place of God.

It could be a person, a hobby, a desire, someone or something that we feel we must have and we dare not let go of just to get us through life.

For Rachel, it was the family gods so she steals them away. Maybe they're going to help because who knows, maybe God will go AWOL and he'll leave us and we'll be on our own.

We need a backup plan. Well, Rachel may have her reasons but in reality, Rachel was doubting God's presence.

God plus my idols and I will be sufficient. God plus my and you fill in the bank and I will be secure.

[16:03] What is it that in our lives we are so desperately hanging on to? What is it that we want that we will never let go of because we fear somehow God is going to let go?

Well, whatever we're hanging on to, in reality, we're doubting God's presence. It's saying, I don't trust you, God. You might leave me.

Well, hear the reassurance today. I am with you, says God. I will not leave you. I am enough for you. I am sufficient for you.

Everything you need is found in me. My presence goes with you. So first, God's presence in our doubts.

Second, we have God's protection in our opposition. God's protection. Laban's not a happy chappy, is he?

[17:08] For two reasons. One, as we'll discover, he finds out his family idols are gone. And two, look at verse 20, Jacob deceived Laban the Aramean by not telling him he was running away.

So he fled with all he had and crossed the river Euphrates and head for the hill country of Gilead. It seems Jacob is in trouble again. Looks like he's going to be dragged back to Laban land.

Well, verse 23, taking his relatives with him, Laban pursued Jacob. This isn't a friendly chasing after him.

This is with an army in tow. He pursued Jacob for seven days and caught up with him in the hill country of Gilead. But then God came to Laban in a dream at night and said to him, be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.

In other words, God is saying to him, don't you harm my man. You mess with Jacob and you're messing with me.

[18:27] I'm watching you, Laban. It turns out God is with Jacob and he is going to protect Jacob.

Is Laban going to heed what God has said? Well, it seems he does because when he finally confronts Jacob, look at verse 28, he says to Jacob, you didn't even let me kiss my grandchildren, my daughters, goodbye.

You've done a foolish thing. I have the power to harm you. But last night the God of your father said to me, be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.

It seems God has put the heebie-jeebies into Laban and he backs right off. You see, God is not always meek and mild.

God is to be feared, especially when you go opposing God's people. So it seems the threat has been averted except for another small matter.

[19 : 40] Look at the end of verse 30. But why did you steal my gods? The gods! What about the gods?

Well, Jacob doesn't know about Rachel's doubting issues and how she had stolen the family gods. Jacob just invites Laban to go and search the tents.

In fact, he makes the unfortunate promise that if anyone is found with the idols, they're going to die. Verse 33.

So Laban went into Jacob's tent and then into Leah's tent and into the tent of the two female servants, but he found nothing. After he came out of Leah's tent, he went into Rachel's tent.

Now Rachel had taken the household gods and put them into the camel's saddle, which acted like a couch at night, so a saddle during the day, a couch at night in the tent, and was sitting on them.

[20 : 49] Laban searched through everything in the tent, but found nothing. And then we could just imagine, just before he goes out, he spies the camel seat that Rachel's sitting on.

And just before he can order Rachel to get up, verse 35, Rachel said to her father, don't be angry, my lord, that I cannot stand up in your presence, I'm having my period.

Well, period pain can be painful, so Rachel remains lying down hoping for some relief. Now it may seem a strange incident to us, but it teaches us something of God's protection.

It seems Rachel's idols, instead of bringing security, have put her in danger, because idols will never save you. The things that we long for and hang on to only get us into trouble, they're distractions, rather than a help, they're a hindrance.

And with no offence, what kind of gods are they that they need protected by a woman suffering with her period. God is making fun to make his point.

[22 : 08] He's saying, look, I can intervene in big ways and speak directly to a Laban and tell him to back off from my people, or you know what? I can use a woman with period pain to keep my people safe too.

God will do whatever it takes to keep his people. Now, we need to be careful not to overplay things here.

This doesn't mean nothing bad will ever happen or that we won't face harm in our life or in our walk with God. No, what this is teaching us is that nothing and no one can take us out of God's saving security.

Remember, Jacob and his family were heading for the promised land and God had made a promise to them, I will bring you back there and I'm not going to leave you until you're there.

No threat or opposition is going to stand in their way. So, just as God was watching over and protecting Jacob, so God always preserves and keeps his people.

[23 : 21] his church, people like you and I, are kept within his care. No matter what the opposition we face, whether it's our own sin, our own suffering, or even Satan himself, nothing and no one can ever separate us from what God has for us.

So, second, we see God's protection protection in the opposition. So, we have God's presence, God's protection and God's provision in our need.

Don't worry, I didn't go looking for all the P words just to be clever. I think that's what the text teaches, so let's move on. Before Jacob says his goodbyes, it seems he wants to get something off his chest with his uncle Laban.

Look at verse 40. This was my situation. This is what it was like to work for you, Laban. It wasn't nice and it wasn't easy.

The heat consumed me in the daytime and the cold at night. Sleep fled from my eyes. It was like this for 20 years I was in your household.

[24 : 44] I worked for you 14 years for two of your daughters and six years for your flocks and you changed my wages ten times.

Laban, you've been out for yourself this whole time. You've treated me unfairly and unjustly, but here there's one thing I want you to know before I leave.

Listen to this. Verse 42. If the God of my father and the God of Abraham and the fear of Isaac had not been with me, you would surely have sent me away empty handed.

But God has seen my hardship and the toil of my hands, and last night he rebuked you. At last, Jacob recognises the source of all that he has throughout his life.

While Laban has been mean and tight-fisted, God has been kind and generous hearted. God has provided for every step of the way and God keeps providing for all his needs as he heads towards the promised land.

[25 : 57] He goes not empty handed, but full, blessed. In his possession are all his family and all his flocks.

He's heading home, a blessed man. Now this might seem very ordinary to you and I and not very spectacular. It might be just a small point, but it carries a big message, doesn't it?

Because when God calls and commands, he will supply all that we need. He doesn't send us off on our journey empty handed.

He doesn't just save you and say, now I saved you, it's up for you to get your way the rest of the way. No, he saves us from beginning to end.

He will provide all that we need in our journey. Now let's be clear, this isn't a promise of prosperity or a word for wealth.

[26 : 58] It's simply the gentle reassurance coming from God to his people that he will supply what is needed as we journey towards the ultimate promised land.

I don't think we need to be in any doubt at all that God will ever let one of his children down.

Everything we need, God will provide.

So, God's presence, God's protection, God's provision, and then lastly, God's peace.

As Jacob gets ready to leave, you see, Laban is still loitering about. He's not letting Jacob go easy, is he? He wants to make a peace deal.

Look at verse 44. Come now, this is Laban speaking to Jacob, come now, let's make a covenant, you and I, and let it serve as a witness between us.

[28 : 09] Let's make promises. Let's make a commitment to leave each other in peace. And as a witness, they set up a physical reminder, verse 45.

So, Jacob took a stone and he set it up as a pillar. So, here we could imagine a big boulder shaped like a pillar standing erect and upright.

That's what Jacob does. Then, verse 46, he says to his relatives, that's Laban and his people, gather some stones. So, they took stones and piled them in a heap, and there they ate by the heap.

So, every time they came near to each other's lands, they're going to see Jacob's stone pillar and Laban's heap of stones next to it, and they will be reminded of their peace deal.

Verse 51, So, Laban said to Jacob, here is this heap, and here is this pillar that I've set up between you and me. This heap is a witness, and this pillar is a witness, that I will not go past this heap to your side to harm you, and you will not go past this heap and pillar to my side to harm me.

[29 : 32] So, there we have it, the peace deal. They're not going to cross over into each other's lands and everything's going to be all right. Now, it seems a good deal, doesn't it?

But we know as we followed along, Jacob and Laban have history. Laban's made continuous promises to Jacob, but the problem is he doesn't keep his promises.

Laban's word is always a broken word. Jacob's memory reminds him and tells him, this peace agreement, well, it could fall apart at any moment.

What Jacob needs is ultimately a peace deal and a peace agreement with God, that God will be with him, protect him, and provide for him.

So, when it comes to making the peace deal, Jacob and Laban have to call on their particular God. In effect, they would say something like this, I promise not to harm my brother, and if I should break this deal, if I should cross over to where I shouldn't go, may the gods come and break me.

[30 : 46] So, Laban goes first with his promise, verse 53. May the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor and the God of their father judge between us.

Now, notice here all the gods he calls on. It's plural, actually, not singular. He doesn't just stop with the God of Abraham. He calls on all the gods.

The gods of Nahor, my grandfather, and the gods of my great father, all the gods, all the ancestries, all of them. I'm calling them all up today to be a witness.

It sounds grand, doesn't it? But with so many gods, the reality is Laban is answerable to no one.

They're just gods of his own imagination and his own idea.

But Jacob, when Jacob makes his promise, look at what he says, the end of verse 53. So Jacob took up an oath in the name of the fear of his father Isaac.

[32 : 03] Now, isn't that strange? Jacob could easily have said, I promise in the name of the God of Isaac. But he's particular, he's focused, he says, in the fear of his father Isaac.

You see, by using the word fear, Jacob is saying something about the God who he now trusts, the God who he follows. This is the creator God, the almighty God.

Jacob may be equal with Laban, but he is certainly not equal with God. His fear of God means that he isn't cowering and hiding, rather one of deep respect and awe of almighty God.

The reality that he is in the presence of glory and greatness. As one writer put it, to fear God is an intense concern not to grieve or dishonour the one who has done so much for us.

And that's Jacob's concern. It isn't so much for Laban, but a desire to honour and follow the God who has been with him and the God who keeps him.

[33 : 24] You see, God is not our best buddy. He's not our therapist that we turn to in our crisis and forget when everything is well.

God isn't our psychologist that we call to because we're having a bad day and we need somebody to say something nice to us. God is to be feared.

God is our creator and king. He's our Lord and our master. The God who demands our service and sacrifice and deserves our loyalty and love.

This is the kind of God that I owe my life to. This is the God that Jacob owes his life to. For Jacob, his concern isn't so much a peace deal with Laban, but being in a right relationship with God.

That's what's important to him. You see, God has promised that I will be present with you and I will protect you and I will provide for you and despite all your wanderings and distractions, I am going to get you home.

[34 : 40] Now how do you respond to a God who says that to you today? Answer, we fear him. We fear him.

How much more then should we respect and honour God who has saved us and intervened into our life by his son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who has come to make the ultimate peace deal with people like us, dealing with our wandering hearts and the distractions with our idols that we won't let go of. He comes and he intervenes and he dies in our place to take the blame that we deserve so that we could have a secure and eternal home with him forever.

Are you at peace with God? Are you walking closely with him? Life isn't about the here and now and building our foundations and our securities and our safety now.

It is trusting in the God who will be with you, who will protect you and who will provide for you.

Listen as we close to 1 Peter 1.17.

[36 : 12] He tells us how we should respond to the God who has done so much for us. He says, live out your time as foreigners.

foreigners. That means we're not living here as our home, but we're looking for something eternal. Live out your time here as foreigners in reverent fear.

That intense desire to honour and please God with all of our life. In thankfulness for his great promises to each one of us.

let's just take time to pray and to reflect on what we're thinking about. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray.

Father, we are conscious that our hearts wander so much to so many other things.

[37 : 36] We get distracted by our idols. And yet in the midst of it all, we have a God who remains faithful.

The God who has promised to keep us and watch over us. Father, we just say thank you that your presence is always with us.

Thank you for the way in which you've protected us in our life, kept us from taking a wrong path or a wrong turn. Thank you for how you protect our faith.

Thank you for your provision in our life, giving us people and other believers around us to care for us, to teach us. And we thank you ultimately for the peace that we have through your Son, that we belong to you.

We will never be unbelonging. thank you that you will bring your people home.

[38 : 52] Thank you that we can trust you. Thank you, Lord. Amen. Amen. Now we're going to sing a song about that journey that we make as we walk with God.