

God who gives Victory over Opposition

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[0 : 00] Father God, Jesus Christ is King. I thank you that that is so gloriously true, even over the labans of the world. Father, please, would you show us that in your word? Please be with me as I preach. Please be with our ears as we listen. In your name. Amen.

We didn't cover it in our reading. We only did one sort of story today for the sake of time. But today we're actually going to preach through two stories. And there's a story at the beginning of the one that we had read.

So if you can look over your Bibles to verse 25, where it says Jacob's flocks increase. We're going to do the famous story of the flocks and the white and the speckled sheep first, and then we'll get to the verses which we read.

Your handout will be really helpful to you today. So please keep that handy and please keep Genesis open on page 31. One of the most common prayers in our church lately is for religious freedom. In fact, there's a petition just as you walk out that we can petition our local member of parliament to ensure that our freedoms are protected.

You see, Christian doctrines, which were once widely accepted by our society, now need the protection of law. Otherwise, we could be accused of things like hate speech or bigotry, things like that.

[1 : 22] And the classic Christian response in times of trouble is this. Don't worry, God is with you. But what is that worth? Think about your children or your grandchildren.

Think about all the regular troubles of life that they have yet to face. Jobs, money, relationships and health. Think about what society they will be inheriting from us and what its views on religion will be a generation from now.

If I said to you, don't worry, God is with them. What is that worth to you? In our passage, Jacob is in trouble on all sides. He's journeying home to the promised land.

He has a father-in-law Laban chasing him from behind. And he has a big bad brother Esau ahead of him. Trouble on all sides. He needs to learn what it is worth that God is with him.

And so on your handout and on the screen, please, the first slide. This is the promise God made to Jacob. And I've split it up there into its two parts.

[2 : 30] Both parts of the promise are our two points today on the handout. I hope you can see that on the handout as well. So the first part, I will watch over you wherever you go. And the second part, I will bring you home to this land.

Both parts of the promise are joined by the bit at the top. I am with you. For us here, as we journey as well, home to our promised land, we need to know what it is worth that God is with us when we feel surrounded by trouble on all sides.

And so point number one. We didn't read it, but as I said, point number one is the famous story of Laban and the flocks. So please look at verse 25. Jacob has been working for Laban for 20 years now, but finally he's had enough and he wants to go home.

That's verse 26. You see, we said that Jacob was arrogant and he was self-made and puffed up. We said he really needs to be disciplined. Well, it turns out that 20 years under a boss like Laban is just what the doctor ordered.

Because now Jacob is learning some lessons in life. He's learning what God is like. And he says to Laban in verse 30, The little you had before I came has increased greatly.

[3 : 48] And the Lord has blessed you, Laban, because I, Jacob, have been here or wherever I have been. But now Jacob wants to go home and he wants his share of Laban's wealth.

But Jacob knows him only too well. Laban is his arch enemy. And he knows he's not going to get a single penny without a fight. But instead he decides to play a game of sheep chess.

Now, I've seen chess being played with real people where they move people around on a big board. But here we see a game of sheep chess. Verse 32.

Jacob says, You see, Jacob says his severance pay for 20 years of making Laban rich will be just a few speckled and spotty animals.

Jacob is beginning sheep chess with only the pawns. Deliberately. Laban must be licking his lips. Jacob's checkmated himself right out of the gate.

[4 : 57] And Laban, being Laban, decides to cheat just for good measure. And so he orders his sons to get all the colored animals and move them three days away. That's verse 35 and 36.

You see, if Jacob's severance pay is to be odd colored animals, Laban leaves him only the pure white animals. Because even I know that white sheep produce white lambs.

White sheep do not produce sort of speckled and spotty animals. And last time Laban and Jacob played chess last week, it was over daughters.

And Laban won that game easily, didn't he? He managed to get Leah married off instead. And he got 14 years of hard labor from Jacob. But this time it is not Laban versus Jacob.

In this game of chess over sheep, it is Laban versus the God of Jacob. See, Laban is rich and powerful. He's cunning and cruel. He is a bully.

[5 : 59] He's enough to strike fear into the heart of Jacob. But God laughs at the Labans of the world. And what happens next is too unbelievable to make up.

So verse 37 and 38. Jacob makes stripy sticks by stripping the bark off some branches. And he puts them in the watering troughs of all the white flocks which Laban has left him.

And verse 39, that's the one that baffles the average Aussie sheep farmer. It says, Whenever they, that is the white animals, mated in front of stripy branches, they bore young that were streaked or speckled or spotted.

You see, if you think you can checkmate God, he will turn the normal laws of farming on their head just to laugh at you. We're supposed to laugh, you see, and not be afraid of the Labans of the world.

Jacob endured 20 years of enslavement and mistreatment, but the whole time God has kept him safe wherever he went. That's point number one. You see, Jacob is starting to learn what it is worth to have God with him.

[7 : 08] And that is the lesson he's going to need if he faces the greater danger of point number two. So point number two is our second story. It's the reading that Preeti gave us.

And this story is like a Hollywood chase movie, you know, where the good guy is on the run and all the bad guys are after him. That's the sort of context and setting. And not since Jacob ran for his life from his brother Esau, has he felt the terror he feels in chapter 31.

And it's because of four small words at the beginning in verse one. I wonder if you can spot them. Verse one, chapter 31. Laban's sons were saying.

We spoke a lot last week about Laban's daughters. We never mentioned his sons. And now they are talking. They said, verse two, Jacob has taken everything our father owned and gained all his wealth from what belonged to our father.

He's stolen our inheritance, is what they're saying. And as things get really menacing for Jacob, his God shows up.

[8 : 17] For the first time in 20 years, God speaks. Verse three. Then the Lord said to Jacob, go back to the land of your fathers and to your relatives. The problem is that's not much help to Jacob.

Because to Jacob, the land of your fathers means the land of Isaac, his dad, who is still angry with him because he cheated him. And the land of your relatives means big red brother Esau, who wants him dead.

There's trouble from a dad and his brothers behind. There's trouble from a dad and his brothers ahead. Jacob is trapped. And in this crisis is our chance to see what 20 years of discipline has taught him.

His only hope is there at the end of verse three. Can you see it? It's our theme today. And I will be with you. Jacob is going to learn what that is worth.

Verse 13. The angel of God takes us back to when he first met Jacob. He says, I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and where you made a vow to me.

[9 : 26] Remember, Jacob said when he first met God, if God will be with me and will bring me back to this land, that will be my God. The Lord will be my God. And now God says, leave this land at once and go back to your native land.

And so then Jacob gives his wives the news that terrifies every husband in the world. He says, darlings, we need to pack up everything, leave our home and move in with my family. And you can imagine a sort of a fry pan coming at his head. But instead, something remarkable happens. And I think it's a sign that God will indeed bring him back, as he said. See, for the first time, Rachel and Leah, the two sisters, are united together. We didn't cover it last week, but Rachel and Leah spent their whole lives divided, fighting over who has the most children to Jacob, things like that.

But verse 14, Rachel and Leah replied. That is, they were together. Do we still have any share in the inheritance of our father's estates?

[10:32] And in verse 16, right at the end, do whatever God has told you. And so they pack up everything and they head out in a caravan. But as they're doing that, verse 19 says something really strange.

It says, Rachel stole her father's household gods. That's a really odd thing. Maybe she stole the little statues to get revenge on her dad. You know, you stole my husband for seven years, so I'm going to steal your gods.

But I think she stole the gods for protection. You see, she knows that God is with them. She knows that they've got a terrible journey ahead. But like everything in paganism, you need to hedge your bets.

And so she makes sure that gods are really with them by stuffing it in a saddlebag. Laban hears that they've all fled. So in verse 22, he gathers his relatives and pursues them.

The translation is actually much more menacing. It's they formed a posse and hunted them down. And so what we have is this. It's Laban's hunting party versus Jacob's escape plan.

[11:36] It's Laban's strength versus God's protection. And most of all, now, it is Laban's little god versus the god of Jacob. And finally, in the hills of Gilead, Laban hunts them down.

Verse 26, that is a perfect summary of Laban. See, he comes, he plays the innocent victim. He says, I'm the one who's been wronged. That I'm really a loving father. I just wanted to give everyone a kiss goodbye and throw them a going away party.

But the truth is, he brought an army to come out and get them. And verse 29 is pure menace. Look at verse 29. He says, I have the power to harm you.

Menacing stuff. And so God steps in. He warned Laban previously. He says, don't do or say anything to them. Don't harm them. But of course, Laban being Laban, he can't help himself.

So verse 30, he says, why did you steal my gods? Of course, Jacob is innocent. He doesn't know anything about it. But he accidentally puts his wife, Rachel, in harm's way. Verse 32.

[12:45] He says, if you find anyone who has your gods, that person shall not live. You see, if Rachel stole the god, the little god, for protection, that little statue better wake up.

Because Laban is about to go searching for it. Verse 33 and 34. He searches through the tents. But Rachel has the little statue in her saddlebag. And she's sitting on it.

It's a really odd thing, isn't it? It ought to be possible to kidnap a god. To godnap him. But that's what she does. You see, Rachel thinks that's what it means for God to be with them.

Sort of stuffed in your pocket. She needs to learn to only put her trust in the God of Abraham and Isaac. You see, while the God of Jacob watches and protects, this little God of Laban has been kidnapped.

But then things get really ridiculous. And actually a bit disgusting. Have a look at verse 35, everyone. Rachel said to her father Laban, Don't be angry, my lord, that I cannot stand up in your presence.

[13:51] I'm having my period. You see, in a crisis, you find out what your gods are made of. Laban's little God is made of stone and wood.

And right now is being defiled by Rachel's time of the month. It's pretty gross to our ears. But the author wants us to laugh at Laban's God.

And in verse 41, Jacob finally stands up to the bully he's been afraid of for 20 years. Verse 41 is the speech of his life. Verse 41.

It was like this for 20 years I was in your household. I worked for you 14 years for your two daughters and six years for your flocks. You changed my wages ten times. If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the fear of Isaac, here it is, had not been with me, you would have surely sent me away empty handed.

But God has seen my hardship and the toil of my hands. And last night he rebuked you. You see, Laban is a picture of a man who sets himself up against God.

[14:59] He is the arrogant atheist who thinks all us Christians are gullible and stupid. Laban is here for the atheists to recognize themselves.

He's had 20 years of puffing himself up, of making himself rich, of taking all of God's blessings and never bending the knee once. But today all his power, his little gods are standing alone against the God of Abraham and the fear of Isaac.

And he is the one who looks weak and stupid and beaten. And there are some really delicious sort of contrasts in our passage.

So verse 42. The God of Jacob sees and is concerned, whereas the little God of Laban is stuffed in a saddlebag. Verse 44. Laban and his army, they ask for a peace treaty from an unarmed family caravan.

Laban comes out to hurt his daughters and his family. But in verse 55, he ends up kissing and blessing and sending them away peacefully. We said last week that God is disciplining Jacob.

[16:07] But this week, he's been teaching him what it is worth that God is with you. This is the lesson Jacob needs to learn because next week is the even bigger danger of big red brother Esau ahead.

Do you see how the chapters are working together? And this lesson helps us at the bigger level. The society issues we talked about.

But I think it also helps us in the crisis that is at home. What is it worth that our God is with you? What is that worth to you?

This doesn't mean it will always be sunny days. Remember, Jacob was enslaved and mistreated for 20 years. But God watched over him.

He preserved his life. There is pain on the journey, to be sure. But God will keep us until we get to the promised land.

[17:10] It is not a bruise-free arrival, but it is a safe arrival. So that's the lesson of the passage.

But if you really want to hear this the way the first audience did, I want to show you something which I think is quite sensational.

You have to go back to chapter 15 if you want to hear this, as the first audience did. So please, can we have a slide? That is one of the promises God made to Abraham, Jacob's grandfather.

And what I want you to do is can you spot the parallels between that promise and the story of Jacob and Laban? So this passage, it matches Jacob's time in Haran.

It says your descendants will be strangers in a foreign country. Well, we saw that Jacob was in Haran. They will be enslaved and mistreated, it says there. Well, we saw that happen to Jacob under Laban.

God will punish the nation they serve. Yep, he did that to Laban. He took away all his wealth. And it says they will come out with great possessions. We saw that as well. The only wrong note is right at the beginning, where it says 400 years, because Laban was only there for 20 years.

[18:21] See, this promise here isn't speaking about Jacob and Laban per se. This promise is about the exodus in Egypt. You see, the first audience of Genesis were the Israelites.

600,000 Jacobs are wandering in the wilderness on their journey to the promised land. Moses wrote Genesis for his first audience, the Israelites, to help them make it home.

Just like Jacob from chapter 21, the Israelites will one day be enslaved and mistreated. They will work hard to make the bad guy rich. Just like Jacob, they will have to flee with flocks and family. Just like Jacob, they will have a powerful evil guy behind them, an angry brother Esau ahead of them, or Edom, as Esau's descendants will go on to be known.

Israel needed to learn what it is worth that God is with them. Moses teaches them this lesson by showing them an almost identical story to their great-great-grandfather, Jacob, the first Israel.

[19:33] Do you see the parallels? I think it's genius storytelling by Moses. For us here, we are the next audience. I put that on your handout. We're the next audience.

But perhaps we have forgotten, perhaps we've forgotten what it is worth. Because we just trot out the line all the time. Yeah, God is with you. God is with you. Perhaps we've forgotten what it is worth.

Maybe we're so easily overwhelmed by the troubles that we see in our society. Perhaps we feel outnumbered and left behind by our culture. We forgot that God is still with us.

Standing for Jesus on this journey, it will involve persecution. We don't want to be glib about the Christian life. But perhaps we are tending to swap the God of power for little gods that can be hidden or beaten.

Perhaps we forget that we are protected and watched over by a loving God of strength and power. A God who will bring us home. What I'm going to do to finish, I'm going to read some New Testament verses which complement this story here today.

[20 : 46] What I'd like you to do is close your eyes and you can pray if you want to. And I'm going to pray as we finish. These are some promises from the New Testament. So from Matthew.

Then Jesus came to them and said, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age. From John. And from Romans 8.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written, For your sake we face death all day long.

We're considered as sheep to be slaughtered. No. In all religious persecution, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

[22 : 18] So our Father God, we praise you that you are with us in the person of Jesus and in your spirit living inside us. Father, we're so grateful that you will not leave us as orphans, but this is a troubled road ahead of us.

Standing for Jesus is dangerous. Please help us in these times of trouble, in the crisis. Please help us to trust in you, not in weak and stupid idols.

Please, Father, be with us as you promised. In Jesus' name. Amen.