

God's Providence Remains True

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 24 September 2017

Preacher: Noon Bid Lee

[0 : 0 0] Now, I don't know about you, but my reaction can be summed up in two words, no way. It's one of those clips where it would be hard to believe unless you saw it.

If I said there's this awesome quarterback who receives the ball and he simply walks through the defensive line with all eyes on him and scores a touchdown, you'd be like, no way.

Well, the Bible is filled with stories like these, and today we are faced with one of those passages from our series on Genesis. As we heard from our reading today, there's a lot going on with Jacob, his uncle Laban, and a whole lot of sheep.

But if you're joining us for the first time, let me bring you up to speed on what's been happening. God promises Abraham to make him a great nation, that he's going to have many descendants, and that he will be God's agent to bless the world.

And the same promise is then passed down to Abraham's son Isaac in Genesis 26, and now to Isaac's second-born, Jacob. And this is what God promised Jacob back in Genesis 28, verse 13 to 15.

[1 : 1 3] God comes to Jacob before he enters Haran, his uncle's land, and says, I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I'll give you and your descendants the land which you are lying.

Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth. All the people on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go.

And I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you. So this was God's promise. And last week, we see Jacob run into a little bit of trouble working for his uncle Laban.

But today, we see that Jacob has finished working off his debt and now wants to return home. You see, if Jacob were to stay living under his uncle, everything that he accumulates would actually belong to Laban.

But a greater risk would be Jacob dissolving into the lineage of Laban's family rather than of Isaac and Abraham's. So Jacob says in verse 25 to Laban, Send me on my way so I can go back to my own homeland.

[2 : 1 9] Give me my wives and children for whom I served you. You know how much work I've done for you. So Jacob's work here is already done. But can you see how it still feels like everything still belongs to Laban?

Asking for his wives and children? It's a bit weird, isn't it? Well, Laban seems to have plans of his own. And tries to convince Jacob to stay. So here comes round two of Jacob versus Laban, which is point one on your handout, an honest wage.

So last week, we discovered Laban is pretty dishonest. He's a bit cunning. He's a bit shady, right? Just like Jacob. So we've got the dishonest uncle and the dishonest nephew battling it out once again.

And we are about to witness one of the most intense business deals play out. It's like an episode of Shark Tank, Bible edition, right? If you don't know what I'm talking about, don't worry.

You're not missing out, right? So Genesis 30 verse 27. But Laban said to him, If I have found favor in your eyes, please stay. I've learned by divination that the Lord has blessed me because of you.

[3 : 27] Name your wages and I will pay them. Remember when God said to Jacob that he will be a blessing? Well, we see that being fulfilled here, don't we? Laban knows that all that he has gained is actually because of Jacob.

And he doesn't want to lose that. Laban here isn't asking for Jacob just to stay an extra few years, but he wants him to stay for good. Please stay. Name your wages.

Live under me. Please stay. But Jacob needs to be careful here. Because Laban said the same thing before when Jacob worked for Rachel. And how did that end?

What was meant to be a seven-year contract with one wife turned into a 17-year contract with two wives because of a technicality. Jacob clearly said, I want Rachel.

To which Laban said, sure, I'll give you my daughter. And here we go again. Jacob, however, is reluctant to set a wage. You see in verse 29, he says, You know how I have worked for you and how your livestock has fed under my care.

[4 : 33] The little you had before I came has increased greatly. And the Lord has blessed you wherever I have been. But now, when may I do something for my own household?

Jacob points out once again that by staying, he's not building up his own household. But Laban persists, What shall I give you? Come on, just give me something to work with here.

Which Jacob now strangely replies. He says, You know what? Don't give me anything. But if you do this one thing for me, I'll go tending your flocks. Rule number one when it comes to business deals, you never look desperate.

Always show you're willing to walk. Apparently. I don't know. I'm not a businessman. Regardless, this is what happened. Jacob sees that Laban is desperate for him to stay.

And now plays the game of, you know, the little cat and mouse game. And this is where Jacob should start pushing for a good deal, right? He should get something profitable on his side. If you're talking about figures, maybe you say, 55% belongs to me.

[5 : 39] You keep 45% of the sheep. Or, you know, 50-50 on the sheep. But the goats give me 70 and you keep 30. Like something like that, right? But here's Jacob's deal in verse 32.

He says, Let me go through all your flock today and remove from them every speckled or spotted sheep, every dark-colored lamb, and every spotted or speckled goat.

They will be my wages, and my honesty will testify for me in the future. Any stock that is not speckled, spotted, or dark-colored will be considered stolen.

Now, this is a bad deal. Let me tell you why. By the way, in the past month, I've read far too much on the breeding and biology of sheep and goats. I've been on agriculture.vic.gov.au, coloredsheep.org.nz.

I would recommend them if you are curious. But let me tell you, going back to the passive right. So the reason why this is bad is because when it comes to breeding sheep, the gene that makes them white is what we call the dominant one.

[6 : 49] And all the colored and patterned genes are recessive. And this is the same for the spotted or speckled goat. But to put it simply, there's a much higher probability for the new flock to belong to Laban.

And just so we're clear. Now, so the white one on the top, the big one, easy to produce, right? You get heaps of those. The bottom ones, not so much, right?

In case you needed a visual rep, right? So it's going to be hard to breed the kind of sheep Jacob will inherit. And if he were to let nature do its thing, you're expecting a lot of white sheep.

See how it's bigger? There's a lot of them. So this deal is so profitable for Laban, he accepts it straight away. He doesn't even need a haggle.

Laban says, agreed. Let it be as you have said. But Laban being Laban makes what was a bad deal for Jacob even worse. Look at verse 35.

[7 : 51] That same day, Laban removed all the street-spotted and dark-colored lamb and goats, but left only, if I could just bracket it, the dominant ones with Jacob.

I mean, this wasn't part of the deal, right? And to be honest, it was quite a dog move by Laban, once again. He's clever, but still a dog move, right? He even places the spotted, speckled one, Jacob's wage, under the care of his sons and puts a three-day distance from Jacob just to make sure there's no funny business.

You see, the easiest way to get the spotted sheep is if you have them in the first place. You get the spotted one and the spotted one to mate together, and then bam, you got your lamb, right?

And other than that, the only other way to get different colored or patterned sheep is if two white sheep have recessive genes in them and they have a baby.

And that's only by chance. So by Laban taking away your primary source of producing the flock you want, Jacob, he's in a bit of a trouble, isn't he?

[8 : 58] Simply put, once again, what was already unfavorable for Jacob has now become even worse. But remember, Jacob isn't a fool. This situation has to have crossed his mind, especially dealing with his uncle.

I mean, he's been doing this for 14 years. He's got to have a plan. And this is where our story gets a bit ridiculous, if you didn't think it was already. This is where we're like, no way.

Verse 37. In case you were wondering what these trees look like, there you go.

So this is Jacob's plan. This is his ingenious plan. He goes, maybe if I put those branches in front of the sheep, just maybe, right?

Maybe. That's his plan. He's going to put them there. They're going to mate, and he's just going to hope that they come out spotted. But this is the crazy part. Verse 39. It tells us, And after he gets the first initial few, Jacob then separates his flock and kept all the strong one with him and the weak one with Laban.

[10 : 30] And in verse 43, it tells us that, In this way, Jacob grew exceedingly prosperous and came to own large flocks and more, to the point where, in chapter 31, verse 1 tells us, Jacob pretty much has taken everything now, which, by the way, only took six years.

It's such a drastic shift in ownership that Laban, who once saw Jacob as a blessing, now feels differently about him. But the question we need to ask is, Why did this work?

Why did Jacob take on this deal in the first place? I mean, did he out-deceive his uncle? Well, we find the answer in chapter 31, verse 3. So, look at that with me.

It says, Then the Lord said to Jacob, Go back to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I'll be with you. So Jacob said word to Rachel and Leah to come out of the fields where his flocks were.

He said to them, I see that your father's attitude towards me is not what it was before, but the God of my father has been with me. You know that I've worked for your father with all my strength, yet your father cheated me by changing my wages ten times.

[11 : 44] However, God has not allowed him to harm me. If he said, The speckled ones will be your wages, then all the flocks gave birth to the speckled young. And if he said, The streaked ones will be your wages, then all the flocks bore streaked young.

So God has taken away your father's livestock and has given them to me. Verse 10. In breeding season, I once had a dream in which I looked up and saw that the male goats mating with the flock were streaked, speckled, or spotted.

The angel of God said to me in a dream, Jacob, I answered, Here I am. And you said, Look up and see all the male goats mating with the flock, are streaked, speckled, or spotted.

For I have seen all that Laban has been doing to you. 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.

So what made Jacob take this horrible deal? Well, it was actually his faith in God's promise. He took what seemed to be crazy, right, and followed through with it, trusting in God's faithfulness.

[12 : 52] But noon, what about the whole branches thing? Didn't that play a part? Wasn't that his trump card? Right? Well, there's a lot of debate what's going on here. Some say it works, others don't. Once again, read way too much into it.

It's sheepgenetics.gov.au. That's for you. But this is where I land on it, right? Things you do for preaching, right? Anyway, if you and your spouse, this is my conclusion, if you and your spouse both have black hair, and you want your child to have green hair, looking at the color green won't help you.

I mean, you could try, but it won't help you. Likewise with the flock, some branches with some pattern and colors on it, like we saw before, isn't going to change how they're young. Look, some say it does play a factor.

Happy to debate later. But regardless, it worked. Not because of Jacob or his methods, but because of God. No doubt that selective breeding was an element of success, but this alone would have taken decades, when for Jacob it only took six years.

Which is why when Jacob recalls every good thing, every blessing, he attributes it to God. In verse 13, God tells Jacob to now uphold his vow that he made back at Bethel and return to his native land.

[14 : 11] So if we look back, if we go back to where we started in our passage, every time Jacob was proactive in wanting to return home, it was actually driven by his response to God.

From making the bad deals to the laying of the branches, it was all faith driven. So he could have sung or danced, he could have done something different, but the results would have been the same because in the end, it was God's sovereign hand that was the ultimate factor.

And now Jacob is testifying to his wives in hope that they would also respond in faith and leave with him to his homeland. But how do they respond? Well, let's look.

Verse 14. Then Rachel and Leah replied, Do we still have any share in the inheritance of our father's estate? Does he not regard us as foreigners? Not only has he sold us, but he has used up what was paid for us.

Surely all the wealth that God took away from our father belongs to us and our children. So do whatever God has told you. 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, Aram, to go to his father Isaac in the land of Canaan.

[15 : 28] See, for Rachel and Leah, they can't deny that God's hand was at work here. You see, when Jacob was cheated by his uncle, they were cheated as well.

And every good that occurred to Jacob was also extended to them. They don't even consider themselves to be a part of Laban's household anymore, but now under the house of Jacob, which is ultimately in the house of God.

So in faith, they both agreed to submit and follow their husband, which, by the way, was a huge response. Because this wasn't a simple move. It's not like moving to Sydney, right, if we're in Melbourne. It's not that simple.

It was actually very, very dangerous to leave a household without their permission. Back then, there wasn't a government that ruled. Instead, every family operated independently.

So your family was your protection. And Laban, he's still in his own land, remember. He has family he can call on to pursue Jacob and his wives and to take everything back and even kill him.

[16 : 30] Jacob, on the other hand, what does he have? He's got himself, two wives, and children. It won't be much of a fight, will it?

And this wasn't a simple decision. There's legitimate dangers, legitimate costs involved, but in faith, all the good that has been done to them and all the good that God promised to do to them, Jacob and his wives still chose to trust God.

And we see here, they're ready to move. So in verse 19, when Laban had gone to shear his sheep, Rachel stole her father's household gods. Moreover, Jacob deceived Laban, the Romanian, by not telling him he was running away.

So he fled with all he had, crossed the Euphrates River, and headed for the hill country of Gilead. Now this is a weird way to end our passage, isn't it? After all this momentum built of Jacob finally getting what it means to put his trust in God, to put his faith in God, we see his deceptive nature take over again.

Not only that, but we get a glimpse of what Rachel's like as well by stealing her father's household gods. But that's for next week. That's just to set that up, right?

[17 : 50] But here we're left thinking, has Jacob slipped back into his old ways? Will this break God's promises? Well, for now, we can be certain that God has remained faithful despite Jacob's failing.

And staying on our passage today, what can we learn from it? Well, at Bethel, God promised Jacob descendants, blessings, and to protect him until he returned home.

We can tick off descendants. He's got a few kids, right? He's been a blessing to others. And we are currently seeing him being protected by God by him telling him to return home. If there's anything to take away from this, it might be this.

God is faithful to his promises. But noon, that seems to be the same message over and over again, isn't it? Well, it seems like the book of Genesis is trying to make something really clear, doesn't it?

God is faithful. God is good. God does not lie, and his words will prove to be true. And we can be certain of that today. But be clear on this.

[18 : 57] God's character hasn't changed. He will forever be faithful, good, and true. But the promise has. The promises Jacob had isn't for us.

God hasn't promised us descendants, nor does he promise us wealth or influence in the same way. This doesn't mean take random risks in the world and God will bless you, right? Like go make bad business deals, invest in everything, and he'll bless you if you have faith, right?

That's not what he's saying. What God promises us today is much greater, much more valuable than any amount of wealth, any amount of wealth, any amount of fame or prestige. God doesn't promise us any speckled or spotted lamb, but he has already given us the lamb of God who was slain on the cross for all our sins.

He has given us Christ Jesus, his one and only son, so that anyone who believes him will not perish, but have eternal life. God has promised to forgive us, to be holy and righteous, to find fullness and joy in the creator, to be accepted, to be adopted, to be reconciled and redeemed, to no longer live under the curse of sin and death, but to be brought into new life.

These are the promises. But not only that, in Romans 8, verse 38, it's on the side, it assures us that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither present nor the future, nor any power, neither height nor death, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.

[20 : 33] Friends, if you're not a Christian, the even crazier thing about these promises is that it has already been fulfilled. It's already available for everyone today.

There's no waiting 20 years like Jacob did. No cleaning up your act before coming to God. Jacob still struggled with his flaws and we'll see that in the coming weeks.

But he still had faith. He still trusted God on his word. And I invite you today to put your faith in Christ if you haven't done so. But what about for us that have already put our trust in him already?

Well then, let me challenge you. How are you going about living in response to God's promises? Jacob had faith in God completely which led him to do some crazy things.

And we have countless of examples in the Bible. We can see this playing out in the life of Moses. Everyone know the life of Moses? Famous children's story. Murder.

[21 : 36] Deception. Corruption. Children's story. Yep. Children's story. But as we know, when the Israelites are running away from Pharaoh, God tells them to actually walk towards the sea rather than go around it.

And when everyone panics and is like, oh, this is the worst thing ever. Like, how dare we run away? And then Moses goes to God. He's like, everyone's panicking. What do we do? And then God says, chill Moses, just stretch out your hand and just part the sea.

That's a paraphrase, by the way. Don't go googling chill Moses and expect that passage. Or how about the story of Jericho? Joshua is appointed as the new leader over Israel when they come to conquer Jericho and God tells them to get a band together with their army.

And he says, go and march around them for six days, right? And on the seventh day, that's when you play your trumpets. That's when you shout and I will bring down the walls. And you have to admit, that's pretty crazy, right?

I mean, by the fourth day, if you're in the army, right? You've got to be thinking, really? We're doing this again? I mean, oh, we're sticking with this plan, are we? Okay, okay. We're marching again.

[22 : 45] Don't make a sound. No shouting, right? But regardless, these Israelites did it. They marched around six days. On the seventh day, they yelled and shouted and played the trumpets and the walls of Jericho fell.

And if you need more examples, go to Hebrews 11 later. There's plenty of examples there. But in our New Testament reading today, I had the Beatitudes read for us today.

This is Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and I think it's a helpful indicator of if we're living in light of God's promises in faith or if we're not. Because remember, Jacob was considered blessed.

And here Jesus tells us who is blessed. So just to pick out a few, not all of them, but just listen to these and tell me if you think it's not crazy, right? It said, blessed are the poor in spirit.

Blessed are the meek. Rejoice and be glad when they insult you because of me. Do not store for yourselves treasures on earth, but store treasures in heaven.

[23 : 52] It says, forgive those that hurt us to love our enemies. If we live by these, we're going to look a bit crazy, won't we?

People will think we're foolish even. This means sometimes at work we'll choose to act in ways that might not benefit us at all. Maybe we'll end up with a loss.

Maybe at the cost of valuing people as people rather than stepping stones to where we want to be. This means we value sex differently to be reserved for marriage and for it to be exclusive, right?

When the world screams, no, you're doing it wrong, you're missing out, you're depriving yourself of pleasure, right? Dave, you're not missing out. Like, that's what the world would tell us, right?

But, I mean, love our enemies? The world would say, no way. Only a fool would do that. But for us who believe in Christ, we already see the ultimate example of this on the cross, don't we?

[24 : 57] The symbol of ridicule, the symbol of foolishness, the symbol of weakness for the worst of criminals used by God to glorify the Son of Man. I believe it's 1 Corinthians 1, verse 18, where it says, For the message of the cross is foolish to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.

So, friends, I ask you once again, how are you going with this? Is your faith in Christ? Are you responding to His promises at all?

Are you struggling through it like Jacob did? Well, if you are, if you are struggling through them, well, be encouraged once again, because in the end, God will remain faithful to us, not because of what we have done or will do, but because of what He has already done for us in Christ, for those who put their faith in Him.

So, let's pray. Dear Heavenly Father, we thank You that You are good, faithful, and true to all Your promises to us in Christ. Help us to live in light of Your promise and empower us by Your Spirit to live lives for the glory of Your name.

Help us to endure in the face of trials and fill us, we pray, with what Peter calls an inexpressible and glorious joy found in seeing the results of our faith, the salvations of our souls.

[26 : 26] So, please help us in this, and in Christ's name I pray. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.