

Struggling to Escape

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[0 : 0 0] Genesis chapter 31, as we consider together the life of Jacob. There's not many, I think there's maybe four or five sermons left in the life of Jacob. There's still quite a few things to happen to him. But Jacob, we will read from verse 13. Genesis 31, reading from verse 13.

This is the part where God tells him to go back to his own land, and he, easier said than done, he has to flee from Laban, who's basically been his slave for such a long time, and there is so much else that he still has to face en route. He still has to face Esau, and so forth. So it's easier said than done, but that's where he obeys God's voice. So let's read Genesis 31, reading from verse 13. God says, 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. 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.

This is Jacob speaking to his wives, telling them that they need to move on. 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. 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. 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 relative camped there too. Then Laban said to Jacob, What have you done? You deceived me and 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. Now you have gone off because you long 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 a relative, 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. So Laban went into Jacob's tent and 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 entered Rachel's tent. Now Rachel had taken the household gods and put them inside her camel saddle and was sitting on them. Laban searched through everything in the tent but found nothing. Rachel said to her father, Don't be angry, my lord, that I cannot stand up in your presence. I'm having my period. So he searched but could not find the household gods. Jacob was angry and took Laban to task. What is my crime? He asked Laban.

Why have I wronged you that you hunt me down? Now that you have searched through all my goods, what have you found that belongs to your household? Put it here in front of your relatives and mine, and let them judge between the two of us. I have been with you for twenty years now. Your sheep and your goats have not miscarried, nor have I eaten rams from your flocks. I did not bring you animals torn by wild beasts. I bore the loss myself, and you demanded payment from me for whatever was stolen by day or night. This was my situation. The heat consumed me in the daytime and the cold at night, and sleep fled from my eyes. It was like this for the twenty years I was in your household. I worked for you fourteen years for your two daughters and six years for your flocks, 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 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. Laban answered Jacob, The women are my daughters, the children are my children, and the flocks are my flocks. All you see is mine. Yet what can I do today about these daughters of mine, or about the children they have born? Come now, let's make a covenant, you and I, and let it serve as a witness between us. So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar. He said to his relatives, Gather some stones.

[6 : 14] So they took stones and piled them in a heap, and they ate there by the heap. Laban called it Jagar, Seraduthah, and Jacob called it Galid. Laban said, This heap is a witness between you and me today. That is why it is called Galid. It was also called Mizpah, because he said, May the Lord keep watch between you and me when we are away from each other. If you ill-treat my daughters, or if you take any wives besides my daughters, even though no one is with us, remember that God is a witness between you and me. Laban also said to Jacob, Here is this heap, and here is this pillar I have 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 that you will not go past this heap and pillar to my side to harm me. May the

God of Abraham, the God of Nahor, and the God of their father judge between us. So Jacob took an oath in the name of the fear of his father Isaac. He offered a sacrifice there in the hill country, and invited his relatives to a meal. After they had eaten, they spent the night there. Early the next morning, Laban kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them. Then he left and returned home. Jacob also went on his way, and the angels of God met him. When Jacob saw them, he said, This is the camp of God. So he named that place my name. And we'll end our reading at the end of verse 2 of chapter 32. Let's sing, it's a long time since I've sung that, Coming Lord, Reigning Lord. Just a great song, some great truths there. Let's just ask for God's help as we come to his word now in a brief prayer. Father, we come to your word now.

We pray that the Holy Spirit himself would be our teacher and would open this passage to us. Help us to understand, Lord, what we find written there. But help us at the same time, Lord, to apply this to our life. May the Holy Spirit testify to our spirit that we are your children, and that this word also relates to us. So encourage us, we pray, and we ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. These are studies in the life of Jacob, one who said his own life was difficult as he looked back, and that's what we are looking at, someone who struggled with God. In this passage, we have seen his struggles all the way through to this point. And as I was preparing this, two movies came to mind, and these are the two movies. I wonder if you know what they are. You'll certainly get the bottom one, The Great Escape, and the first one, Twelve Years a Slave. This very much sums up this part of Jacob's life. He's been 20 years a slave. The plan was he was only going to go to his uncle for a few days, remember? He had to flee from his home. He stole, he deceived his father, stole his father's blessing, had to run, flee from his brother, Esau, and the plan was he'd go up to Uncle Laban, stay there for about a few days or whatever, and then come back. And he's up there for 20 years. And now he has to escape. He's told by

God to go back to his own land, and this is going to prove far more difficult than he would imagine. And he knows the situation has changed. And we're looking at the life of Jacob at two levels, you remember. We're looking at God's main big promise to Jacob as one of the patriarchs, the same promise he gave to Abraham, to Isaac, now to Jacob, that he would bless them, make them into a great nation, but through them all the nations of the earth would be blessed. And that includes us, includes our salvation. That great, big, ultimate promise of God to establish his kingdom. But also, there is also this lesser promise, you could say, in that it was a promise for him as an individual, that the Lord would be with him. He met him at Bethel when he flees from his brother, and he says to him, I am with you,

I will watch over you wherever you go. He doesn't know it's going to be 20 years, 500 miles from home. I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.

[11 : 04] Great personal promise to Jacob. And now, after 20 years a slave, this final drama between him and his uncle Laban is about to unfold. It's about to come to a close. And you know that God latterly had blessed Jacob. He blessed him in his family life, gave him 11 sons at this point, and gave him various wives, and so forth. And now, he blesses him. You remember a vision or whatever. He gets much cattle, and so forth. He grows bigger than Laban, in that sense, more blessed. And God uses this new circumstance. Laban is now hostile towards him. His family is hostile, accusing him of stealing this wealth. Laban has made him great, and so forth. And he realizes, now is the time for me to move back home. At the same time, God tells him, go back home. God is using all of these circumstances, and he does this often in our life as well. Never leaves us, nor forsakes us, leads us and guides us through his counsel, through his word, through the counsel of others, through circumstances. We looked at that last time. Now, what I want us to do this evening, in the moments that remain to us, is to consider God's word to Jacob when he says to him way back in Bethel, I am with you. I will watch over you wherever you go. I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you. I want us to look at that, because that is really the verse that God is going to fulfill as he will leave Haran 500 miles away from home. And he has fulfilled this, and God continues to fulfill this. So, let's look at three things in that promise that God made him all those 20 years ago. First of all, leave this land. Leave the land of Haran. For the past 20 years, life has been difficult for Jacob, far more difficult than he could have imagined. He had no idea, as you have no idea, how your life ever pans out. You don't know what's going to happen to you tomorrow, whether some illness or whatever's going to befall you. We simply never know. And for the past 20 years, life has been difficult. He's felt like a slave to his uncle Laban, changing his wages and so forth. And yet, the Lord has given him two, or you could say four wives, his 11 sons, one daughter, many possessions, and the mention of camels. Last time, it was equivalent of today's BMW or whatever. God had blessed him.

He didn't just have sheep and goats. He had camels. God had been with him. And we saw last time that the situation had changed. Laban's attitude towards him was not as it had been right at the very start of chapter 31. God was going to use those circumstances to bring him back. I am with you.

I will watch over you. And I will bring you back to this land. So, the time in Haran with Uncle Laban was not to be determined by Jacob or Laban. It was to be determined by God, I will bring you back. I will decide when this is. And then in chapter 31, verse 13, the first verse we read this evening, I am the God of Bethel. Remember me, I was a God to who you met there, where you anointed a pillar, and where you made a vow to me. Remember, I am the God that appeared to your grandfather and to your father. Now, leave this land at once and go back to your native land. God is now fulfilling the word that he said to him in Bethel 20 years previous, go back to your land. And Jacob agrees to this, obviously. And this new situation, he's now rich, he is wealthy, and the Lord tells him to go back.

And he mentions this to Rachel and Leah. They agree with him. Yeah, you're dead right. Our father squandered our inheritance. There's nothing keeping us here. Basically, do whatever God has told you to do. And at this time, the timing is perfect for him to make his escape, as it were.

The sheep shearing season is now at hand. All the farmers, they're all out in the field with their sheep and so forth. It's a busy, busy time. It's coming up a busy time for farmers, isn't it? Now, lambs and so forth. Such a busy, busy time. Winter is going. Spring is coming. This is the perfect time to attempt. This escape. And that's exactly what he does. And they're so busy, it takes Laban three days before he gets news of this. So, he gets a three-day head start, at least. And Jacob takes all his property with him, all the stuff that he's gained in here, and all the stuff that belongs to him. He hasn't stolen anything. God has blessed him. He takes that which is rightfully his, and he leaves.

[16 : 33] Rachel, on the other hand, takes something that doesn't belong to her. She takes the gods that belong to the family, the father's household gods. We don't know exactly what these objects are. Laban calls them gods. Why did you steal my gods? He says in verse 30 of the passage that we read.

Various things are put forward. Possibly that it was how they obtained or believed they obtained revelations, how what would happen in seeing the future and so forth. That's what they believed.

Maybe she took them to stop him seeing where they were and where they were going. We do not know. Others say that these gods symbolized the, at some of these, almost like title deeds to the family, to the land, to the inheritance. You take the gods. If you own the gods, you own basically the inheritance. People have said that as well. We don't know exactly 100% why she took them. But anyway, they head off, and they set off in this journey. Here is one map here that shows the first river, or the river. They have to cross the river Euphrates, which they do. And verse 21, they fled with all he had, crossed the river Euphrates, headed for the hill country of Gilead. If you put the next map up, Daniel, you'll see that that's 500 miles from Beersheba, where he's basically heading back to.

He's been away up there, and he's heading back. The wee arrow that I've put in is the hill country of Gilead. Laban pursues Jacob and finally catches up with him there. He's almost home. He's almost there. He's in the hill country of Gilead. That distance is about 350 miles. It's taken him seven days to catch up with Jacob there, which means that Jacob has had to travel about 35 miles a day.

Boy, he's not hanging around, is he? It really is quite something, 35 miles. Laban, but anyway, 350 miles later in the hill country of Gilead, 10 days after he left pursuing him, he catches up with him there. And this, as he's on the doorstep, this situation is very dangerous for Jacob. Even at the words, verse 25, Jacob pitched his tent in the hill country. Laban overtook him, and Laban and his relative camped there too. It's very military-like. They're camped there, they're camping there, and it's almost like a war zone beginning to happen. And Laban knows this. And Laban says to him in verse 29, I have power to harm you. It's a mismatch. Laban is there with all his relatives. Jacob's there with his family. He's basically outnumbered, and he knows this. It's a time of real danger.

[19 : 43] And in this messy situation, the God who's called him to return home is the God that he will need at this particular point in time. When God calls us to something, he never abandons us, saying, I'm going to, I want you to do this, but you're on your own. He always leads us and guides us. He protects us. He provides for us. And Jacob will need God's help in this very time. He can plan and organize. He can escape. He can do whatever he's doing. But ultimately, he will need God's help if he is to return home. The God who says return is the God he will need to return. And Jacob knows this, and God speaks into his situation. So secondly, the second promise was this, leave this land. I will bring you back. Secondly, I will not leave you. And that is what's happening here in this incident in the hill country of Gilead. Jacob needs to know that in the midst of all this danger, God is at work. And God is with him. God promised him that he would be blessed. He would have many descendants and so forth.

He has blessed them the whole time he's been away for those 20 years. Despite hardship, despite all the difficulties, he has been blessed by God. He has been protected by God. God has been the one who has looked after him. And Jacob acknowledges this. Verse 42, we read in chapter 31. He says this to Laban, if the God of my father, 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. God promised to protect him, and that is exactly what he does.

In chapter 31, verse 3, go back to the land of your fathers, and I will be with you. Here he's about to experience that God is with him, even though Laban is with him now. God is also with him. And God has to intercede. God has to do to Laban what Jacob can't do. God has to speak. And Laban at this time, try and see things from his point of view. He's raging. He is not pleased. He takes all his relatives for seven days. He travels 350 miles. The steam must have been coming out of his ears. He's basically saying, these daughters are mine. All these children are mine. Everything you possess is mine. You've taken everything that belongs to me. That's how he sees this. He's very angry. And therefore, in the midst of this angry man who has the power to do him harm, God intervenes. And God says to him, be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad. I quite like the way that's worded.

You would normally just say, just be careful you don't say anything bad to him. He's my servant. But also, good or bad. In other words, God's basically saying, watch what you say to Jacob.

You're going to meet him. Now, watch what you say. It's as simple as that. And God is with him. And Laban acknowledges this. If it wasn't for that, I would have done you harm. But God has stepped in.

[23 : 14] The God who is our great provider and our great protector never leaves us nor forsakes us. He's faithful to his word. And that is what Jacob discovers here, that the God who calls him is the God who promises, who provides, and also protects him. And that's what we learn. That's what Jacob is learning here. But lastly and thirdly, there is this wee phrase that I quite like. He is still much to learn. There are still a lot of things that's going to happen to Jacob from this point on before he finally passes away. You know, Joseph and going down to Egypt. There's a lot still to happen to Jacob.

And Jacob is learning that God leads and guides. And God never leaves him nor forsakes him, provides for him, and has done this. But Jacob has also gone through a period of lifelong learning. And I've given that the third title. And with this, I'll finish. Life, when I was in Nidre, when I worked in Nidre, there was a lecturer there from Napier, used to worship with us. He was an art lecturer. And he was not only worshipping with us in Nidre, he was doing an art course in Nidre. And there was another word linked to this wee phrase, lifelong learning. It was basically that learning didn't stop after school or college or university. We're always learning. Lifelong learning. That was the buzzword. Maybe you remember that. Maybe it's still in vogue. I don't know. Another word linked to that was communiversity. In other words, your university was your community. And that was the case. I used to go and see his class and see his setup in the Hayes Business Centre. I'm surprised I can still remember this stuff. Anyway, and it was quite impressive. People from the estate would come and they would learn art and they would do various things. Under this banner, lifelong learning. You're always learning in life. And as Jacob is learning in life, and he's still got much to learn. He's learned a lot up till now. He acknowledges God. So you and I are still learning. We like to think we've arrived and are just going to shuffle off to glory. But it's not the case. We don't know what we have still got to learn until the Lord places us in a situation where we go, oh Lord, this is scary. I don't know what's happening. And we need to learn. We still need to learn to trust God. And Jacob is learning.

Now what has he learned? We've mentioned this quite a few times, that the Lord protects him. The Lord is looking after him for the past 20 years, and despite angry Laban that could take his life and really just run amok with his family, he knows that God has been with him. He says this in verse 41, it was like this for 20 years when I was in your household. I worked for you for 14 years for your two daughters, six years for your flocks, and you've changed my wages 10 times. And he said, you wouldn't have sent me home with songs and tambourines. It's hard not to laugh at that when you hear Laban saying that. I would have just put a big party on for you. There'd be tambourines singing. The ghetto blasters would have been going. We vouldavongs, there'd have been, oh, we would have partied away. And he's gone, really? You think so? No chance. It would never have happened that way.

God needed to protect him. You would have sent me away with nothing. No wives, no children, absolutely nothing. And Jacob has learned to know that God has provided for him. God has protected him. And he's learned what it means to praise the Lord. And that's what you see here. If the God of my father, the God of Abraham, the fear of Isaac had not been with me, you would surely have sent me away. But God has seen my hardship, the toil of my hands, and last night he rebuked you. He stands in awe of God. He uses the wee phrase, the fear of Isaac. Basically means standing in awe of God, the reverence of God, the fear of Isaac. There's God who is holy, who is awesome. And compared to these gods that you can hide under a saddle and a camel, he is an almighty God. So he knows this. And also he knows something of peace. God brings peace between these two men. It finishes well between them. Despite 20 years of animosity, lack of trust, hardship, struggling, each one trying to outdo the other, it ends well. The pillars are set up, the altars are set up, God is acknowledged, and they part company. He knows something of the peace and the love and the grace of God. It's great when you see God bringing peace into our lives. After 20 years, this finishes well. That night when they're having a meal and Laban goes away the next morning, you just think, you can almost see the sigh of relief as Jacob draws a line under that whole episode. You could see him years later saying, oh, 20 years with my uncle Laban. Nightmare. But God was faithful. And he, despite the protection and all these difficult things, it ended well. There was peace between us. And it really is quite something when you see this happening. Here is a chapter of Jacob's life where God has been faithful. A big chapter, 20 chapters, as it were, 20 years of difficulty, of delay, of disappointment, and so forth. But God has proved his words that he gave him at Bethel, that he would never leave him nor forsake him. He would bring him safely back.

And this must have been such an encouragement to him at this time. It's not the end of Jacob's struggles, and we'll continue this next time. He's still got to meet Esau, the brother who's out to kill him. He's no idea. We know what happens next. We know there's a big hug fest. He doesn't know this.

[29 : 43] His chickens are coming home to roost. God has told him to go back. It's scary when God tells you to do something. And you just go, really? That is scary. But he moves. We'll still see there's more planning and scheming. We'll see he gets into trouble on the map. You see where he's going. You've got Shechem.

You've got various places. He still shoots himself in the foot quite a few times. But the Lord is with him. The Lord never leaves him, nor forsakes. God's ultimate plan is still on course. And God's promises to him as an individual are still on course. I hope you feel encouraged as you look at the life of Jacob. You are part of God's kingdom plan. He will use you in a kingdom sense, perhaps, as you witness, as you shine for Jesus, that big promise to build his kingdom. And you are part of that bigger promise that was given to Abraham that's still part of you as well. But there's also those personal promises to you that, John, I will never leave you, nor forsake you. I'll be to you what you need whenever you need it. Just walk with me. Trust me. It will be a life of lifelong learning. It won't be easy.

There might be, you might know of Uncle Laban chasing you. Other things might chase you, haunt you, or whatever. But God is faithful, and he will lead us, and he will guide us. And he knows how to bless us, strengthen us, and to preserve us, and to keep us. And that's what this passage, at the end of these 20 years, we draw a line under this now, a whole new bunch of chapters is about to open up. May the Lord continue to speak to us through the life of this wayward man, this work in progress. Let's stand and we'll sing together.