

Uncle Laban
Genesis 29:1-30

Surely this was one of the most despicable acts ever perpetrated in the Old Testament. After years of being the deceiver, Jacob himself became the victim of someone else's deception. And what a deception it was. Jacob had worked seven long years for his wife, the beautiful young woman named Rachel. But on his wedding night, obviously in the darkness of night and under the veil of privacy, Uncle Laban sent in Rachel's older sister Leah to be Jacob's wife. Then, to add insult to injury, Laban required another seven years of service from Jacob before giving Rachel to him as his wife.

There is, of course, the sense that turnabout is fair play, but surely nothing would justify this cruel deception of keeping a man from the woman he truly loved. But there is much more here than merely an almost unimaginable example of just retribution. God's gracious providence is at work, governing and controlling all that takes place. And the nation of Israel is being built, for it is the twelve sons of Jacob who would become that great nation.

Remember God's great promise to Jacob at Bethel, which we studied in,

Gen.28:15 Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you."

Genesis 29 is the fulfillment of that promise. God is with Jacob. He is watching over him wherever he goes. And he does not leave him alone in his wanderings. Instead, what is so obvious is that,

I. GOD IS FAITHFUL TO DIRECT JACOB'S PATHS.

There is no such thing as luck. There is no such thing as chance, or good fortune. Only something to which we give the name providence? And what is providence? It is God's governing and controlling all his creatures and all their actions. It is God working all things out according to the counsel of his own will. In this particular case,

A. God's providence is shown by bringing Jacob to the right place at the right time.

v.1-8

Jacob arrives at a well in the field, a well of storage water rather than a well of flowing water. There was a great rock covering the well. It appears from the context that there seems to be a local regulation regarding the well stipulating that its stone covering only be removed at a certain time in the evening, at which time all the flocks of the vicinity were to be watered in turn, in order of arrival. Those who arrived first would get through first, so when Jacob arrived, three flocks of sheep were already waiting. And, we read, the stone covering the storage well was so large that it required several men working together to move it. Such a stone would obviously prevent theft by an individual.

Jacob is at the right place at the right time. With no sense at all of mere coincidence, he reaches the place which was the object of his travels, the city of Haran. He meets some young shepherds with whom he can communicate. They speak the same language.

v.4

He immediately asked about his Uncle Laban, since many years had passed since Rebekah left her father and brother to marry Isaac. The answer was encouraging.

v.5-6

Jacob's heart must have skipped a beat at that point. He knew he was going to Haran, to Laban's family, to find a wife. He had been told by his father to "go at once to Paddan Aram, to the house of your mother's father Bethuel. Take a wife for yourself there, from among the daughters of Laban, your mother's brother." So in an instant, he must have realized that God had perfectly arranged all the pieces of this puzzle. He was at right place at the right time. And the woman whom he must already be thinking would be his wife was about to show up. Rachel, Laban's daughter.

Jacob's next reaction reveals his personal side, his humanity. In his eagerness to meet Rachel, he now wishes for the other shepherds to hurry up and finish their business, and leave.

v.7

They likely sense what is about to happen, too, and they aren't about to leave, let alone break their habit of waiting until the end of the day to remove the stone and water their flocks.

v.8

You've got to really love Jacob at this point, for here is a man with great excitement, waiting anxiously for the woman whom he must think the Lord has chosen to be his wife. And I proclaim all of this in the context of God's providence. I just can't emphasize that enough as we work through these chapters. God is sovereignly arranging all the details, in perfect order. He is showing himself faithful to keep his promise to direct Jacob's paths.

This example is an encouraging one for us to study, for the same God who directs Jacob's paths is directing our own. Perfectly. Sovereignly. And then, finally, from Jacob's perspective, Rachel arrives.

v.9

Since Rachel was so clearly identified as a shepherdess, it is very possible that it was not customary for the Israelites to have young women tend flocks. Now, we know that Laban also had sons as well as two daughters, and they must have been too young or else Laban had so many flocks that it took his whole family to care for them. In any event, Rachel has her father's flocks at the well where God has brought Jacob. Clearly,

B. God's providence is shown by bringing Jacob and Rachel together.

This is such a heartwarming account, so personal, and so full of life. But it is not merely a love story based on sentimental or fleeting emotions. This is real, for remember, Jacob's response to Rachel is based upon his understanding of God's precious promise-- "I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you."

To say that Jacob is thrilled is an understatement. His excitement is impossible to conceal.

v.10

Now, I don't want to be overly shallow, and simply think that Jacob is putting on a show to impress this young woman with whom we might say he has fallen instantly in love. I'm not so sure this was as much an act of a macho man showing off his manly strength, as it was an instinctive desire to help and protect this woman. Whatever his motive, it was certainly noticeable!

So was what he did next.

v.11

Again, that isn't something unmanly or inappropriate, for although Rachel was likely startled by the kiss, it was the kiss of greeting, for Jacob knows that Rachel is his cousin, and the kiss would have been a proper greeting. We would be wrong to call this "love's first kiss."

But whatever she thought of the kiss, she really must have begun to wonder about his weeping. In that oriental culture, such weeping would not have been considered dishonorable or unmanly, as it might be in our own culture, but it would, rather, communicate unspeakable joy. There was for Jacob the joy of being reunited with family. And of course, there was the joy thinking about this young woman becoming his own bride.

Jacob immediately told her who he was.
v.12

The story continues,
v.13-14

Such strong family ties. God's providence continues, and Jacob and Rachel are betrothed by Jacob's agreement with Laban.
v.16-20

This is such enjoyable reading. Jacob is thrilled at God's providence. He is thrilled with Rachel, as a man should be with his wife, as Adam was when God first brought him Eve. There should be this delight in a man's heart as he considers his bride. In this context, there is nothing inappropriate about such observations or even such comments.

God has designed men and women to be attractive to each other, physically attracted, and that attraction is to be an aspect of

the marriage relationship. Remember, at this time Jacob and Rachel are betrothed, committed to each other in marriage. And their love was obvious. It is a good and wholesome thing for a husband to recognize and honor the beauty of his wife, and that they together should enjoy that attraction. It is an appropriate and godly thing, and some of these words are repeated in the love story described by the Song of Solomon, which I interpret to be just such an example of the godly attraction between a husband and wife.

Here in Genesis, Moses records that Rachel was beautiful of form and appearance. And we read in verse 18 that Jacob loved her. That is a bit different than our expression that he was "in love." Being "in love" can actually be a somewhat selfish thing, focusing on the giver of the love. But loving someone, on the other hand, focuses entirely on the object of love. And the true nature of love is to focus on the person loved! Jacob's focus was upon Rachel, not himself. He loved her. He loved her so deeply that he would be willing to pay a very stiff price for her hand in marriage--seven years of labor.

It was his own offer, the spontaneous, generous offer of a man reckless in his desire to express his love. It was, indeed, a bit of a reckless offer. My commentaries suggest something much less would have been appropriate, perhaps one year's service. But not seven. Laban should have been honored by such an outlandish offer, and then graciously refused to accept it. But he did accept it. Laban's selfish nature is exposed, taking advantage of his own nephew and his own son-in-law for his own profit.

Yet because of Jacob's love for Rachel, those seven years "seemed only a few days to him." Those words. They are so sweet, so romantic. And so godly! There is nothing wrong with such strong emotion to exist between a husband and a wife.

Indeed, in God's design, it is supposed to exist. The tender, sweet, genuinely romantic affection between a husband and a wife is a beautiful thing.

Such love from a man should always win a woman's heart. Such a glorious thing God has brought about in his providence. But Laban almost destroys the whole plan.

v.21-24

Even so, God's purpose would prevail. In this event,

II. GOD'S IS FAITHFUL TO ACCOMPLISH HIS PURPOSE DESPITE LABAN'S TREACHERY.

Again, I don't want to focus on Laban, but on God. God is still sovereign, though that next morning Jacob must have been wondering how!

v.25

I do want to say at this point that,

A. Laban's treachery is inexcusable.

It was despicable. One commentator says that in that regard, Laban takes the prize in the Old Testament. It was a horrible thing to do.

It is almost impossible for us to imagine this even happening, isn't it? But it really is quite possible. Jacob was obviously unsuspecting, and had no reasons for suspicions. Further, the two girls were sisters, no doubt with similar mannerism and tone of voice. And there is also some probability that Leah was given Rachel's clothing and perfume. She would have been veiled, or covered, in the public presence of her husband, a sign of her own purity and submission. And when he took her into his chambers and into his bed, it would have been under the cover of darkness,

and no doubt much of the conversation was in whispers. Any quietness or shyness on Leah's part would have been perfectly understandable to Jacob under those circumstances.

So we don't have to imagine Jacob to be a total fool to have been duped by such a plan. The fault lies with Laban, though Leah must bear some fault for agreeing to such an immoral deception. What Laban did was inexcusable. And it was compounded by what he did the next day, when Jacob confronted him.

v.25

He had his answer ready.

v.26

But then he really digs deep into the realm of mean-spirited selfishness.

v.27

He counted on Jacob to be a man of honor, and not to disgrace Leah by repudiating the marriage that had taken place. So he insisted that Jacob go through the bridal week, the week-long celebration of the marriage during which the bridegroom and bride would be addressed as king and queen.

Jacob would be honored all week long alongside his new bride, Leah! What a horrible experience that must have been, realizing he had been tricked and being kept from the woman he really loved. And then, Laban essentially committed extortion, requiring from Jacob another seven years labor in exchange for permission to marry his beloved Rachel.

Unspeakable evil! Inexcusable treachery. Unimaginable anguish. But remember what this is all about. God is still

accomplishing his purpose. And in God's purpose, the twelve tribes of Israel, the twelve sons of Jacob, would descend from both these wives, and their respective maidservants.

B. God's purpose was to make the children of Jacob into the nation of his people.

So, despite the wickedness of Laban, despite the inherent sinfulness of having two wives, and despite the additional wickedness of having two additional concubines, it is through the line of all four of those women that the twelve tribes of Israel come.

And so we read of Leah, and her maidservant.
v.23-24

And we read of Rachel, and her maidservant.
v.28-29

I should emphasize that the description of the maidservants is intended as a preview for the next chapter, when we get a description of those twelve sons. And their inclusion here goes to show just how precisely God does carry out his plans. We'll study those twelve sons next week. But let's go on this morning to one more important point. And that is Jacob. Specifically, Jacob's reaction.

I made no attempt to hide Jacob faults in earlier chapters, starting right with the wrestling that he and his twin brother Esau engaged in inside their mother's womb. From birth, Jacob is grasping after Esau to outdo him, to be first. He's born grabbing Esau's heel. Then, of course, he takes advantage of Esau's worldliness and purchased his birthright for that bowl of stew. And then literally steals Esau's blessing from his father Isaac. Jacob is, himself, a great deceiver. He is perhaps the primary OT

example of the NT teaching that says that,

Titus 3:5 "He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy."

But Jacob is now a changed man. And as far as we can tell from what is revealed in Scripture about his life, he changed when God appeared to him at Bethel, the vision of the ladder we studied two weeks ago. We read about Jacob's reaction to that dream,

Gen. 28:16 "Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it." 17 And he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!"

Gen. 28:18 "Then Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put at his head, set it up as a pillar, and poured oil on top of it. 19 And he called the name of that place Bethel; but the name of that city had been Luz previously."

Gen. 28:20 "Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going, and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on, 21 so that I come back to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God. 22 And this stone which I have set as a pillar shall be God's house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You."

Jacob saw the Lord, and his life changed! That was likely the moment of his salvation, his regeneration. And what we see in chapter 29 through his reaction to Laban's wickedness is that,

III. GOD IS FAITHFUL TO SHAPE JACOB'S CHARACTER.

God is shaping and molding the man whose very name would be changed to Israel, the father of the great nation of God's people. And that man, whose early life was characterized by

deceit, would be a godly and mature servant of the Lord. The lessons Jacob learned surely bear great relevance to us, for they are the same lessons we ought to learn. First,

A. Jacob learned the grace of godly perseverance.

Now, I use that wording to emphasize that everything Jacob learned was a product of God's work in his life. What Jacob learned are certain graces, certain things given to him as a gift of God's grace.

The first, I call the grace of godly perseverance. We see that godly perseverance in action in chapter 32, in what is likely Jacob's finest hour.

Gen. 32:24 Then Jacob was left alone; and a Man wrestled with him until the breaking of day. 25 Now when He saw that He did not prevail against him, He touched the socket of his hip; and the socket of Jacob's hip was out of joint as He wrestled with him. 26 And He said, "Let Me go, for the day breaks." But he said, "I will not let You go unless You bless me!" 27 So He said to him, "What is your name?" He said, "Jacob." 28 And He said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed."

Jacob's finest hour. He struggled with God. He sought God's blessing and would not give up! He wrestled with God, which becomes an appropriate illustration and description of fervent prayer. Jacob would not let go of God. He pled with him persistently. He persevered. It was a godly perseverance that he learned in dealing with Laban.

These days we know very little about perseverance. We live in an instant society. As a whole, we know very little about the persistence needed to overcome great trial. We want to be made comfortable instantly, and we quit or run away when trials get too

great. But that is not God's way. Godliness means perseverance.

On a human level, Jacob had every right to quit. Humanly speaking, he had every right give up on obtaining a wife from this family, or to rebel against Laban. Presumably, he had every right to disavow any relationship with Leah, for surely there's wasn't a legitimate marriage, since there was no mutual agreement ever expressed. But Jacob persevered under those unimaginably painful circumstances.

First, his perseverance with the original offer.
v.18-20

He waited patiently until his contract was fulfilled before asking for his rewards.
v.21

Then, more explicitly, his perseverance in the fact of Laban's incredible additional demands.
v.26-27

Notice the very next words.
v.28
Jacob kept his word.
v.30

The point is that such trials, ordained and permitted by the hand of God's providence, are used to built character. Two classic NT cross references for our encouragement,

Rom. 5:3 "And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; 4 and perseverance, character; and character, hope. 5 Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us."

And, James 1:2 “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. 4 But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.”

In Jacob’s case, perseverance finished its work. He was perfect and complete, mature. It was the testing of his faith that developed perseverance. Therefore, on the basis of that verse, and with the added evidence of my own experiences and, no doubt, many of yours, it is true that the strongest faith is the faith which has been the most fully tested! Jacob is a perfect example. “Count it all joy when you fall into various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.”

Somewhat related to that, and certainly an essential part of godly perseverance, is the attitude of submission we see here.

B. Jacob learned the grace of humble submission.

We could expect Jacob to rebel against Laban. We could expect him to rebel against his authority, and to rebuke him disrespectfully. He does nothing of the kind.

v.25-27

v.28 “Then Jacob did so...”

Amazing, isn’t it. No hint of rebelliousness. No hint of demanding his own rights. No pride, even in defending himself knowing that Laban was in the wrong. Nothing. He just agreed. He agreed to whatever Laban required. He fulfilled his week, according to verse 28.

v.30 “And he served with Laban still another seven years.”

He submitted even in the face of the most horrible treachery imaginable. He learned the grace of humble submission. He would learn what we read explicitly in the NT,

James 4:10 “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.”

Indeed, James 4:6 “God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble.”

So ultimately, this chapter is a lesson about godliness. It is the evidence of perseverance and submission. And the foundation of those virtues lies in the absolute assurance of God’s faithfulness to direct our paths and accomplish his purposes in us. All of this is for our encouragement, that whatever circumstances may come your way, you can be assured of God’s faithfulness, assured of God’s great promise from,

Gen.28:15. “I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you.”

That promise is, of course, most completely fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. It is the promise you receive when, by faith, you trust in him for your salvation as he is offered to you in the gospel.

So, humble yourself in the sight of the Lord. Learn to depend upon him for every detail of your life. And when you confront the difficulties of life, wrestle with him and don’t give up as you pursue his blessing. And as you wrestle with God in that way, be assured that you have an advocate, a great high priest who intercedes for you. And he is Jesus Christ, whose body and blood lies before us in this Sacrament.