

Spotted and Speckled

Genesis 30:25-43

There is a familiar saying that goes something like this, “Take advantage of me once, shame on you. Take advantage of me twice, shame on me.” The obvious wisdom of that worldly proverb is that you should never allow yourself to be vulnerable to anyone else. You can excuse yourself once, but never twice. Never let anyone take advantage of you a second time. That’s the wisdom of the world.

God’s wisdom is quite different, and that wisdom is revealed by the actions of Jacob. We’ve seen how Laban had taken advantage of Jacob once already. A horrible, despicable act. After the completion of seven years labor, the agreed-upon arrangement for Jacob to receive permission to marry Laban’s daughter Rachel, Laban sent in under the cover of darkness his older daughter Leah to be Jacob’s wife. Then he subjected him to another seven year’s labor for the right to marry Rachel also.

Now, it seems to me, that even if I had agreed to those fourteen years of service, I would be ready to go. Immediately. And I would quickly, let me emphasize quickly, reject any legitimate job offer this man might come up with. But Jacob didn’t reject the job offer, and instead agreed to go to work for Laban now, after 14 years of servitude. You have to think he’s a little crazy, or at the very least, incredibly naive. He should have expected what wickedness Laban might do next, and perhaps he did. But he goes on to work another six years, making a total of twenty.

And we could dare to ask “Why?”

I think there are sufficient answers to that question in our text

this morning, and the focus of those answers is the faithfulness of God. Jacob’s actions served to magnify the faithfulness of God, and though that has been a repeated message throughout our study of Genesis, I don’t apologize for the repetition. I don’t think that I could possibly tell you often enough about God’s faithfulness, nor could I ever explain to you fully enough all the implications of God’s faithfulness. It’s a wonderful, encouraging, edifying doctrine.

God is faithful to keep his promise, and as we go through this account of Jacob, the one specific promise keeps coming to mind,

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.”

The context for this display of God’s faithfulness is the contrast between Jacob and Laban. Specifically, the wickedness of Laban and the godliness of Jacob. We’ll look first at,

I. THE WICKEDNESS OF LABAN.

It is certainly true that God’s faithfulness is often most clearly seen when we come face to face with the wickedness of man. God often reveals his faithfulness to us as a direct response to the wickedness and evil which men inflict on us.

In other words, when you confront the wickedness of evil men, you can be most assured that God will be faithful to you. “I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go.” Or, the NT words of,

Hebr. 13:5 “Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” 6 So we may boldly say: “The LORD is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?”

Jacob lives out that faith, as he confronts the wickedness of Laban, a wickedness with few or no restraints. What we see in Laban is,

A. The wickedness of a man who withheld what he owed his servant.

This wickedness is as bad as could possibly be, compounded several times over. Laban compelled Jacob to work seven years for Rachel. That was oppressive. Then he tricked Jacob by giving him Leah instead of Rachel. That was despicable. Then he required Jacob to work another seven years for Rachel. That was unthinkable.

And then we get to our chapter today. Laban should have graciously given Jacob what he owed him--his freedom. But as was the case when Jacob finished those first seven years of labor, he had to come to Laban to get his just wages, which then was Rachel's hand in marriage. After 14 years, he still has to come to a man unwilling to freely give what he owes. Jacob still has to come asking for what was rightfully his.

Such wickedness. It's really quite a simple principle.

Lev. 19:13 "You shall not cheat your neighbor, nor rob him. The wages of him who is hired shall not remain with you all night until morning."

There is a great responsibility given to those who owe wages to others. It is the responsibility to pay. And pay timely. In our culture, I don't believe the civil law requiring paying a man daily is force, but the principle of that command is still in force. The general equity of that OT civil law is that employers ought to be obligated to pay their employees on a timely basis. It would seem obvious that the longest period of time would be one month, since our financial transactions are almost based monthly. But even a

full month is a long time to work before getting paid. It would seem twice a month, or even weekly in many cases, should be the appropriate application.

Jacob worked seven years, and still no "paycheck," which was, of course, his freedom. So he had every right to ask for it.
v.25-26

Just so you don't think I'm being too hard on Laban, look at how his dealing with Jacob is described in the next chapter. Jacob is speaking to Laban's sons.

Gen.31:7 "Yet your father has deceived me and changed my wages ten times..."

It is a wicked thing to cheat a man by not paying what you owe him. We also see in Laban,

B. The wickedness of a man who selfishly took advantage of his servant.

Look at what happens next.

v.27-28

That seems on the up and up. The offer is generous, substantially changing the status of Jacob, from slavery to becoming a partner able to freely dictate his own terms. Actually, it may even seem that Laban is a bit desperate, though clearly selfish. He is willing to go almost any limit to retain a man whose services have been so advantageous to himself.

Jacob responds properly by first confessing his faith in God's blessing. He gives the glory to God.

v.29-30

Then he rightly considers his own family. Laban responds with

repeated desperation.

v.31a

To that offer, Jacob responds with a wise understanding of his father-in-law's selfish disposition. Jacob doesn't want Laban to give him anything, for that would make him a debtor, and surely Laban would always throw it back in his face. Jacob doesn't want to receive anything that Laban could hold over his head. He doesn't want to be a debtor to a self-seeking, deceptive, ungodly schemer.

v.31b

Then he comes up with an incredible suggestion.

v.31c-33

Now, you need to know that in that area, sheep are normally white, so there would be very few speckled or spotted sheep or dark lambs. And goats are normally black or brown-black, not spotted or speckled. Jacob's wages would be limited to the abnormally colored sheep and goats, and whatever abnormally colored offspring they produced. In this proposal, Jacob's wages could be seen as next to nothing.

After all that Jacob had done for Laban, Laban should have reached deep into his pockets and offered Jacob a healthy salary, one corresponding to the benefit Laban had received from Jacob's labor. He did nothing of the kind.

v.34

This arrangement was highly favorable to Laban, and of very doubtful value to Jacob. From a 20th century, capitalistic, American point of view, you could say that Laban was not wrong to accept this proposal. It's just a business deal. But such a view misses the whole point. Laban is taking advantage of his servant! Laban is manifesting his wickedness.

Laban was the employer, and even if Jacob was the one who made this gracious offer, Laban should have accepted his responsibility to treat Jacob fairly. There is a OT principle of law and justice that is carried over to the NT, and applied to a very different situation. But it's the same principle, and the principles of justice embodied in the OT civil law are still valid principles of justice. The principles remain the same, they just apply in different ways. Look at,

1Tim. 5:17 "Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine. 18 For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer is worthy of his wages."

That's an OT principle of justice. "“You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain.” Even the animals should be properly paid! How much more man. And of course, Paul is applying that principle to preachers, to pastor/teachers whose work is preaching and teaching. They should be paid. 'The worker deserves his wages.' I'm not particularly flattered by the comparison to the ox, but it's a wonderful principle, applying in every situation. 'The worker deserves his wages.'

In agreeing to this arrangement, Laban is taking advantage of Jacob. But it gets worse, yet.

v.35-36

Laban, in effect, stole all the animals that he had just promised to Jacob! Then he took them away separated from the rest of the flocks by the distance covered in three days. And Laban had his own sons take care of these flocks.

Interesting, isn't it. Laban is the dishonest one. Jacob is the honest one. You would think that Jacob would be the one who

couldn't trust Laban. But it's reversed. Dishonest Laban wouldn't even trust a man who had so incredibly proven his trustworthiness. Laban wouldn't let Jacob separate the animals. And Laban wouldn't let Jacob take care of both flocks.

Now, keep in mind, we can assume that there weren't too many sheep and goats in the spotted and speckled category. Probably just a few. But Laban could even part with a few of his flock. As pitiful as the wages were for Jacob, Laban wants to make sure that he doesn't have to pay a thing!

As bad as the original agreement was, as much as we can criticize Laban for even entering into that agreement, how much worse to even go back on that agreement and cheat Jacob out of the little that he was supposed to receive. Such utter wickedness.

C. The wickedness of a man who deceitfully violated an agreement with his servant.

But Jacob still didn't leave. He goes on to demonstrate his faithfulness. His godliness.

II. THE GODLINESS OF JACOB.

Now, to be sure, Jacob had very sufficiently proven his character, his redeemed character, his regenerated spirit. After he was so drastically changed at that encounter at Bethel, the place where God appeared to him, he presents himself as a godly man. We've already referred to some of that, for these verses describe,

A. The godliness of a man who served faithfully.

v.25-26

That's called integrity. Jacob had nothing to hide. He could honestly say that he had worked hard for Laban. He had worked faithfully. He explained it even further in,

v.29-30

Integrity is still so important. Integrity is more important than appearance. Integrity means working such that if you have a supervisor, he doesn't even need to check up on your work because he knows it will be done well and done properly. He knows that you won't cut corners, and that you don't need his supervision to work at your best. That's integrity. And Jacob had a clear conscience, because he had worked as unto the Lord. The work he has done, was done to the best of his ability. It was done properly and well.

That is part of your Christian duty! Not just so-called spiritual things, or religious things. But how you work. How you handle the daily responsibilities of life, whether it's work in an office, factory or a mill, or work in the home.

Jacob shows us the Christian value of hard work, what many people still call the puritan work ethic. Working hard and working faithfully, to the best of your ability, is an aspect of godliness. It's an essential part of Christian living. It is so clearly identified in,

Col. 3:22 "Bondservants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh, not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but in sincerity of heart, fearing God. 23 And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, 24 knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ."

This is Christian doctrine. This is Christian living. This is part of the gospel. You who have been redeemed by the blood of Christ, show it by the way that you work. For some people, the word "duty" is a dirty word, not a good thing. I've heard debates about the dangers of that word, emphasizing that what we do for the Lord should be done as a delight, not as a duty. But I believe that those two do not contradict at all. Christian duty is Christian delight! At least, it ought to be. So duty is a very good thing.

Similarly, Christian obedience to the law should be Christian delight. The point, doing what you are supposed to do should be the delight of your heart! Jacob shows us that so well.

But he shows us much more. There is much, much more to his actions here than simply faithful service to Laban, as incredible as that may seem to us. There is before us, a man walking by faith. I appreciate some of my commentaries bringing this out so forcefully. Jacob's godliness is,

B. The godliness of a man who trusted in God to provide for his needs.

First, go back to his original offer.

v.31-33

Certainly, Jacob is wishing to avoid being in debt to Laban. So he says, "Don't give me anything." But why, then, does he make that offer of accepting the abnormally colored animals as his wages?

I believe that it is accurate to say that he is taking a step of faith. He is demonstrating the willingness to live by faith. As one commentator says, Jacob will take only the [abnormally colored animals.] If he is to acquire wealth according to God's will, the Almighty Disposer of events must grant it. This was a fine act of faith on Jacob's part. He cast himself wholly upon God's mercy."

As another man writes, "It would thus be entirely up to God as to how many animals would become Jacob's...It was an act of pure faith on his part."

Seldom, if ever, do we actually live on the edge, like that. Seldom, if ever, do we actually cast ourselves wholly upon God's mercy. Seldom, if ever, do we actually take such a dramatic step

of faith, that we are doomed to failure if God doesn't act to bring his blessing. So this is really quite an inspiring moment from Jacob, one which should challenge you about the level of comfort and security that you insist upon in your own life.

Jacob did something so big, that if God wasn't in it, he would fail. But too often, we live day to day as if God's presence and blessing were irrelevant. Sometimes we live day to day as if we can really take care of everything ourselves. Depending upon our own selves and not upon God. But let's look at what, exactly, Jacob did after Laban took all the spotted and speckled animals away.

v.37-42

I have three different commentaries that give three very different interpretations of that. Let me explain them briefly. One interprets what Jacob did as his own deception foisted upon Laban. In other words, Jacob sort of takes things into his own hands, and instead of trusting God as I've just described, he actually works to deceive and defraud Laban by manipulating the breeding of the animals to his own advantage.

Understand from that, that there was a sense in which people thought that what a lamb saw during her gestation or even copulation, would actually have an effect upon her offspring. So, if she saw speckled or spotted objects during her breeding, she would be more likely to produce speckled or spotted offspring. And although that seems rather strange to us, still today we don't know or understand all the effects of prenatal influences.

Under this commentator's suggestion, however, Jacob's actions were deceitful, even if they were somewhat justifiable.

A second commentator goes to the other extreme, if you will,

and suggests that what Jacob was doing was actually working to increase the fertility of these flocks, actions which would obviously benefit Laban and only to a lesser extent, himself. In that theory, the water treated with certain chemicals in these trees, and perhaps the mere sight of these striped rods may have served simply as an aphrodisiac to the cattle, promoting fertility in order to speed up the reproduction process in the shortest time possible. Jacob would then be expecting a far greater benefit to Laban than to himself, and would have been very surprised at the outcome.

A third option, perhaps a balance of those two, seems to fit the context the best. In this view, described in Calvin's commentary, Jacob was actually attempting to increase the number of striped or spotted offspring. But in doing so, he wasn't being the least bit deceptive or unfair to Laban. He was simply working faithfully, and God used his work to bring about his own ultimate purpose of blessing Jacob.

In other words, Jacob was not prohibited in his contract with Laban from employing these methods, so he was, therefore, free to utilize them in God's providence. Put very simply, God brings about his purpose of blessing Jacob by means of the faithful labors of Jacob himself. That explanation seems to fit the overall context, for Jacob surely is trusting in God to provide for his needs, even for the livelihood necessary to feed his family.

And, with such trust, with such dependence and faithfulness in Jacob, set against the wickedness of Laban, we see clearly,

III. THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD.

And again, that's what this is all about.

I'll repeat the promise.

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."

Jacob believed God, as did his father Abraham. And because he lived by faith, because he trusted in God to provide for all his needs, he experienced God's richest blessing. And,

A. God's blessing upon his people is an obvious testimony of his faithfulness.

It certainly was here. It was a testimony that Laban couldn't miss. For all his wickedness, he certainly wasn't blind.

v.27

Jacob repeated that description of God's blessing, in a very appropriate way,

v.30

"The LORD has blessed you since my coming." That's not boasting. Except boasting in the Lord. And it's not wrong to boast of the Lord's blessing, if we are, in fact, boasting in the Lord! So we ought to pray for that blessing on our personal lives and upon the life of our church, so that we can boast in the Lord. We ought to boast of what the Lord is doing among us, as a testimony of his faithfulness.

Jacob did just that. He told of the mighty deeds of God. Throughout Scripture, we have descriptions of the mighty deeds of God, particularly in the salvation of his people. And the greatest form of such boasting is the singing of psalms and hymns in worship. So it is that our worship should be a boast of God's mighty acts among us. We should sing of his faithfulness and of his blessings upon us.

Jacob sure had plenty to sing about.

v.43

Literally that verse says that Jacob “burst out exceedingly exceedingly.” Indeed,

B. God’s blessing upon his people brings exceeding prosperity.

Make no mistake about it, this blessing upon Jacob was from God. However you interpret Jacob’s actions and his motives, what happened was a miraculous intervention of God. What is implied here in Chapter 30 is made explicit in the next chapter,

Gen. 31:4 “So Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah to the field, to his flock, 5 and said to them, “I see your father’s countenance, that it is not favorable toward me as before; but the God of my father has been with me. 6 And you know that with all my might I have served your father. 7 Yet your father has deceived me and changed my wages ten times, but God did not allow him to hurt me. 8 If he said thus: The speckled shall be your wages,’ then all the flocks bore speckled. And if he said thus: ‘The streaked shall be your wages,’ then all the flocks bore streaked. 9 So God has taken away the livestock of your father and given them to me.”

“God has taken away Laban’s livestock and given them to Jacob.” Such abundant, exceeding prosperity.

Now, I want to be careful here. I want the prosperity of Jacob to represent the riches of spiritual blessing and not the abundance of worldly wealth. I don’t want you going home thinking I’ve presented you with the prosperity gospel--believe in God and he’ll make you rich.

This account of Jacob and his wealth is the account of the

birth of the nation of God, and therefore the wealth is the wealth of that nation, the richest wealth which God can bestow. Sheep and goats are just shadows and types of the real blessings and true prosperity. For our blessings as God’s people are the blessings of this world, they are the heavenly blessings which we have in Christ.

Eph. 1:3 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, 4 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, 5 having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, 6 to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved. 7 In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace 8 which He made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence.”

Heavenly blessings are ours, not sheep and goats! And heavenly prosperity! The riches of our eternal inheritance, riches we can begin to taste even now. So we read in,

Ps. 1:1 “Blessed is the man Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, Nor stands in the path of sinners, Nor sits in the seat of the scornful; 2 But his delight is in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and night. 3 He shall be like a tree Planted by the rivers of water, That brings forth its fruit in its season, Whose leaf also shall not wither; And whatever he does shall prosper.”

God may not make you rich, in the things of this world, but the riches showered upon Jacob demonstrate that he will make you rich in all that matters. If you will walk by faith, if you will live with the same sort of trust in God that Jacob shows us here, God will make you very rich in the exceeding prosperity of his blessings.

So we read in,

Deut. 28:9 “The LORD will establish you as a holy people to Himself, just as He has sworn to you, if you keep the commandments of the LORD your God and walk in His ways. 10 Then all peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the LORD, and they shall be afraid of you. 11 And the LORD will grant you plenty of goods, in the fruit of your body, in the increase of your livestock, and in the produce of your ground, in the land of which the LORD swore to your fathers to give you.”

With such spiritual prosperity in mind, let me end with,

Ps. 128:1 “Blessed is every one who fears the LORD, Who walks in His ways. 2 When you eat the labor of your hands, You shall be happy, and it shall be well with you. 3 Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine In the very heart of your house, Your children like olive plants All around your table. 4 Behold, thus shall the man be blessed Who fears the LORD. 5 The LORD bless you out of Zion, And may you see the good of Jerusalem All the days of your life. 6 Yes, may you see your children’s children. Peace be upon Israel!”