

40. Whose side are you on? (2007)

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, we're going to turn now to our reading this morning and we continue our studies in the book of Genesis, which you will find at the beginning of the Bibles.
- And we're going to read this morning from chapter 30 at verse 25 through into chapter 31 at verse 16.
- And let me just say that as we're going along, there are one or two places where the narrative seems a little difficult to understand.
- We'll look at that later on. There are one or two translation differences between the versions, which I'll perhaps allude to a little bit. But just one other thing I want you to notice. I think this section falls into two accounts, two halves.
- And the chapter division is very unhelpful. The first account really ends with verse one of chapter 31. And then the second account begins at verse two and goes down to verse 16 of chapter 31.
- [1 : 1 1] Each of these two begins with Jacob's mind being on returning to the land of Canaan, the promised land. And each one ends with a verdict on Jacob, firstly by Laban's sons and then by Laban's daughters.
- And I think it just helps us to understand the whole thing, as we'll see later on, if we see it clearly in that structure. Let's begin reading it. Verse 25 of Genesis 30.
- As soon as Rachel had born Joseph, Jacob said to Laban, send me away that I may go to my own home and country or land.
- Give me my wives and my children for whom I have served you that I may go. For you know the service that I have given you. The word there really means slavery.
- The slavery I've given you. But Laban said to him, if I have found favor in your sight, I have learned by divination or by experience that the Lord has blessed me because of you.
- [2 : 1 4] Name your wages which I owe you and I will give it. Jacob said to him, you yourself know I have slaved for you and how your livestock has fared with me.
- For you had little before I came and it has increased abundantly. It has spread abroad. And the Lord has blessed you wherever I turned.
- But now when shall I provide for my own household also? He said, what shall I give you? Jacob said, you shall not give me anything.
- But if you will do this for me, I will again pasture your flock and keep it. Let me pass through all your flock today, removing from it every speckled and spotted sheep and every black lamb and the spotted and speckled among the goats.
- And they shall be my wages. Now here's where it's a little bit difficult. And they shall be my wages and my honesty will answer for me later on.
- [3 : 2 0] Or you might read it. And they or these kinds shall be my wages later on in the future. And my honesty will answer for me when you come to look into my wages with you.

I think what Jacob is saying is take all the speckled and the spotted things out of the flock now. Put them away. Leave the flock pure. And in the future, any speckled and spotted sheep that arise in this flock will belong to me.

Talk more about that later. Everyone that is not speckled and spotted among the goats and black among the lambs, if found with me, shall be counted stolen. Sheep are normally white.

Goats are normally brown or black. And so the spotted or speckled or striped or whatever isn't pure colored is abnormal. And Jacob saying, all of those in the future will be my wages.

You're not giving me anything now. Just that. Laban said, good. Let it be as you have said. And that day, Laban removed the male goats that were striped and spotted and all the female goats that were speckled and spotted.

[4 : 29] Everyone that had white on it and every lamb that was black and put them in charge of his sons. Our version begins that verse with a but. But I don't think it is a but. It should just be and. Laban's not doing something there that Jacob wasn't expecting.

He's doing exactly what Jacob suggested. But Laban did it himself. And verse 36, he said a distance of three days journey between himself and Jacob.

And Jacob passed the rest of Laban's flock. That is all the pure colored animals. Then Jacob took fresh sticks of poplar and almond and plain trees and peeled white streaks in them, exposing the white of the sticks.

He said the sticks that he had peeled in front of the flocks in the troughs, that is the watering places where the flocks came to drink. And they bred when they came to drink.

The flocks bred in front of the sticks and the flocks brought forth stripes speckled and spotted. And Jacob separated the lambs and set the faces of the flocks towards the stripe and all the black in the flock of Laban.

[5 : 39] He put his own droves apart and didn't put them with Laban's flock. Whenever the stronger of the flock were breeding, Jacob would lay the sticks in the troughs before the eyes of the flock that they might breed among the sticks.

But for the feebler of the flock, he would not lay them there. So the feebler would be Laban's and the stronger Jacob's. Thus, the man increased greatly.

He spread abroad and had large flocks, female servants and male servants and camels and donkeys. But, there is a but there, he heard that the sons of Laban were saying, Jacob has taken all that was our father's.

And from what was our father's, he has gained all this wealth. And Jacob saw that Laban did not regard him with favor as before.

Then the Lord said to Jacob, return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred and I will be with you. So Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah into the field where his flock was and said to them, I see that your father does not regard me with favor as he did before.

[6 : 53] But the God of my father has been with me. You know that I have slaved for your father with all my strength. Yet your father has cheated me, made a fool of me and changed my wages ten times.

But God did not permit him to harm me. If he said the spotted shall be your wages, then all the flock bore spotted. And if he said the striped shall be your wages, then all the flock bore striped.

Thus, God has taken away the livestock of your father and given them to me. In the breeding season of the flock, I lifted up my eyes and saw in a dream that the goats that mated with the flock were striped and spotted and mottled.

And then the angel of God said to me in the dream, Jacob. And I said, here I am. And he said, lift up your eyes and see all the goats that mate with the flock are striped, spotted and mottled.

For I have seen all that Laban is doing to you. I am the God of Bethel where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me. Now arise and go from this land and return to the land of your kindred.

[8 : 10] Jacob there is recounting what God had said to him at various times over those years in the past, stretching right back to before even, I think, this bargain with Laban was made.

And he recounted all to his wife and his wives and they replied, verse 14, Rachel and Leah answered and said to him, Is there any portion or inheritance left to us in our father's house?

Are we not regarded by him as foreigners? For he has sold us and he has indeed devoured our money. All the wealth that God has taken away from our father belongs to us and to our children.

Now then, whatever God has said to you, do. Amen. And may God bless to us this, his word.

Well, if you'd turn with me back to the passage we read there in Genesis 30 and 31. And the question I want to ask is, whose side are you on?

[9 : 18] Would you be happy to be identified with this Jacob character, this man that we're getting to know in this story or not?

If you read many of the commentators and the preachers on this passage, you find that most of them give Jacob really a very hard time in this passage too.

They give him no slack at all. They damn him and they slam him for everything he does here. Here's one. It's absolutely impossible to excuse or exculpate Jacob, he says, for this disgraceful plot against Laban.

It's unworthy. It's corrupt. Well, that's one evangelical writer. And there are plenty others in that vein, let me tell you. Well, certainly that was the verdict of Laban's sons, wasn't it, in verse 1 of chapter 31 that we read.

That really marks the end of that first of two rather complementary accounts that we have in our passage today. Each of them, as I said, begins and ends in a similar way.

[10 : 28] You see, at chapter 30, verse 25, we begin with Jacob's desire to return to the land of Canaan. And it ends at verse 1 of chapter 31 with Laban's sons.

And they say, Jacob has taken away all that was our father's. And the second account begins there at verse 2 with Jacob being commanded by God to return to the promised land.

And it ends with a very different verdict down at verse 16. Do you see from Laban's daughters? God has taken away from our father and given it to us and our children.

So who was right? Jacob and his wives or Laban and his sons? Whose side are you on? Well, it's still a live question today, isn't it?

Because the household of Jacob today, that is, the seed of Abraham, which is all who are in Jesus Christ by faith, says the New Testament. We all are prone to face the verdict of Laban's sons, aren't we?

[11 : 33] Constantly. That's true in the West today. The church is constantly seen as an annoyance, as an irritation, full of nasty people.

People on the take. People who impose their views on others. People who are bigoted and so on. And many other parts of the world, as we've just been praying, the church of Jesus Christ, the family of Jacob, are blamed for all kinds of ills and are systematically persecuted.

They take away from society, from us, from our lives and so on. And so we must oppose them. Well, certainly Christian people today, just like Jacob, are not lacking in flaws.

We know that, don't we? We've seen it plainly in Jacob's story. We know it personally in our own lives. The Christian church, the household of God, the people who belong to God, who live under the lordship of Jesus Christ, is a household full of flaws, just like Jacob's household was.

But here's the thing. God stood with Jacob, not with his detractors. And that's the message in this passage that's before us today.

[12 : 42] It's very easy to find reason to oppose and to stand against God's people. Of course it is. It's very easy to say, isn't it? Oh, the church, the church is full of hypocrites, full of people no better than anybody else.

I'm not having anything to do with the Christian church. Yes, Jesus is all right, but don't give me any of that church. It's easy to say that, but be careful. Jesus himself said to his followers, whoever receives you, receives me.

And whoever receives me, receives him who sent me. And likewise, he says to them, if they hate you, it's because they've hated me. Jesus stands with his people.

What you do to the least of these, my brothers, said Jesus, you do to me. And those who hate the least of my brothers, says Jesus, will go away to eternal punishment.

That's not my words. That's Jesus' words. And he's just confirming the words that God spoke to Abraham all those hundreds of years before and confirmed to Isaac and Jacob.

[13 : 48] Words first spoken in Genesis 12, where he promises that through that family, there will be a blessing to all the earth. I will bless those, says God, who bless you.

And those who dishonor you, I will curse. So it's quite a big question for us today, as it was for those in the story in Genesis chapter 30.

Whose side are you on? Are you for the people of God? With all their faults and manifest imperfections, and therefore are you in touch with that blessing from God Almighty?

Or are you against them? And therefore pitted against him? Let's just keep that question in mind, shall we, as we look through this story. As I said, it falls really into these two parts, but we'll divide the first part into two and look at the whole story under three headings.

Laban's greed first, then Jacob's gain, and lastly, Jacob's God. Look at verses 25 to 36 of chapter 30, where the focus is very clearly on Laban's greed.

[14 : 54] Two words that seem to sum up this section are exploitation, on the one hand, and expectation. On the other, Laban's persistent exploitation of Jacob is met by Jacob's patient expectation of God.

Yes, I believe that what we're seeing here is Jacob's patient faith in the face of great exploitation. Jacob is trusting God.

Jacob had certainly gone through the mill, gone through God's mill of testing and tribulation. He'd been virtually a slave to Laban. And yet, as we've seen, God had blessed him according to promise with many sons.

And it seems that Jacob is learning to trust. Yes, he's flawed. Of course he is. But he is learning real faith. And the section begins with Jacob wanting to go back to his home and back to his land as soon as Joseph is born.

We're not told exactly why, but I wonder whether it's that Jacob feels that Joseph's birth, the firstborn of his loved wife, Rachel, that Joseph is the seed of promise in the next generation.

[16:07] And now, having been fulfilled in his birth, he wants to go back to the land. Well, at any rate, his words about his country, his land, echo God's promise to him at Bethel.

This land on which you lie, I will give to you and your offspring. And he's seen his offspring increase greatly with his 12 children. And now he's looking to God to fulfill the other part as he returns to the land.

But, of course, there's a problem, isn't there? He's effectively a slave. And if the custom here in Aram is anything like the Hebrew law in Exodus chapter 21, then Jacob's only right would be to leave Laban at the end of his time of service alone, that his wife and his children would still belong to Laban.

And that's why he has to ask him in verse 26, give me my wives and my children for whom I served you, for you know the service that I've given you. Fourteen hard years he'd slaved for Laban.

But Laban, you see, is an exploiter. Always has been, always will be. And his reply there in verse 27, it's a model of courtesy and cunning, isn't it?

[17:19] Oh, if I have found favor in your sight, Jacob, the Lord, your God, has blessed me because of you. In other words, no, no, no, no, no.

It's not in my interest for you to go away, Jacob. Please stay. And it's not in your interest to go away either, Jacob, you see. That's the point of verse 28, you see. Name the wages that I owe you.

That's a barb from Laban there because he knows perfectly well that Jacob is owed no wages. What was the deal they had? A work for the wife. And he got his wife, two of them, not any money.

So Laban doesn't owe him any wages. So in verse 29, Jacob entreats him. Look, I've slaved for you, he says. You know it. And you've said it yourself, Laban.

It's the Lord who's blessed you because of me. You had hardly anything when I came. But now, look, you've increased abundantly. You've spread abroad. That's the very term that was used by God in blessing Jacob.

[18:19] At Bethel, you will increase abundantly. You will spread abroad. Now, he gives Laban here the chance, doesn't he, to act justly. And Laban seems to relent in verse 31.

Oh, what shall I give you, he says. Well, that harks back ominously, doesn't it, to Laban's previous offer in offering to do a deal with Jacob. And Jacob certainly lived to regret that.

And so he's learned, hasn't he, to treat Laban's offers with great caution. So instead of asking for something, Jacob says to him, you shall not give me anything. But I'll go on pasturing your flock if you will agree one thing.

Now, verses 32 and 33, as I said, can be a bit confusing, but I think it's best to take it the way that I read it. That Jacob says, I'll remove today all the odd animals, the spotted and speckled goats and sheep and so on.

Normally the sheep are white, the goats are brown or the black, and there would only be a handful of this odd color. But I'll remove all of those out of the way. And after today, from now on, later, verse 33, when I pasture your pure flock of white sheep and brown goats, any arising like that, again, the spotted and the speckled ones, they'll be belonging to me.

[19:40] So it'll be absolutely clear to you and to me, both and to everybody, whose animals are whose. Now Laban, verse 34, can hardly believe this deal.

And he agrees immediately. Let it be so, he says. And in verse 35, he does exactly as Jacob had suggested, removing all these animals so that Jacob is left with a pure herd.

But notice, he doesn't let Jacob do it. He does it himself to make sure there's no skulduggery. And he moves them three whole days' journey away, just in case Jacob's planning on any secret crossbreeding or anything to stack the odds in his favor.

And Laban can hardly believe his luck. This is a win-win for him. This is an absolute no-brainer. He knows that odd sheep only come very sporadically, a tiny fraction of the herd.

And so, if Jacob is going to prosper at all, it must mean that Laban's herd is going to get massively big. If that doesn't happen, well, it just means that he's getting Jacob's labor for a pittance all over again as he had in the past.

[20 : 48] But if Jacob does garner the blessing of God so that his odd sheep and goats increase, then Laban's must be enormous.

He'll get even more of God's blessing. That's what his reasoning is. And that's what's going on. I know our ESV might suggest that Jacob that Jacob expects to get the current batch of the spotted animals.

But that doesn't fit with verse 31, does it, where Jacob says, you'll give me nothing. And verse 35, that but there, really, is better just translated and as the NIV and as the other ones do.

But if that is the deal, and I think that is the deal, why on earth does Jacob suggest such a bum deal? What on earth is in this for Jacob?

Well, I think the answer is because Jacob is learning to trust God and to trust in his word. And God has been speaking to Jacob.

[21 : 51] That's why we need the second part of the story in the second half of the passage. Look at chapter 31, verses 10 to 12 again. Now, Jacob here is relating to his wives a vision that he had from God or several visions perhaps a long time before, before this encounter with Laban.

Verse 12, you see, God says, I have seen Laban's exploitation of you, Jacob. Now, remember, whenever God says those words, I have seen, it means, and I'm about to do something about it, Jacob.

And he tells Jacob how. You see, look at verse 12. All the mating animals, all of them, are striped and spotted and mottled. In other words, the normal ratios of these flocks are totally reversed.

God's revealing to Jacob what he's going to do with Laban's flock. And Jacob believed God and he trusted him to do as he promised.

Jacob was expectant, just like the psalmist in Psalm 5 that we sang, O Lord, in the morning you hear my voice, in the morning I prepare a sacrifice for you and watch, watch for your answer to my prayer.

[23 : 05] The old metrical verse puts it very well, I early will direct my prayer to thee and looking up an answer will expect. Jacob believed God and what he'd said to him and he trusted him even when the odds seemed totally stacked against him as they seemed to be here.

It's not that Jacob is being wicked and deceitful here. It's quite the reverse. He's patiently expecting expecting the blessing that God had promised, the God who had promised blessing and been faithful thus far.

And he wants it to be absolutely clear to everybody that it is indeed the Lord alone who gives blessing. He's already testified to that in verse 30. In fact, Laban himself acknowledged it, didn't he, in verse 27.

There can be no question of self-promoting or dodgy gain. My honesty, says Jacob in verse 31, my righteousness will be clear to all because of the way we've done this.

I've started with a clean, pure flock. Now that is faith, isn't it? That's like Elijah on Mount Carmel where instead of just a wooden altar of sacrifice, he builds a stone one and then covers it with water just to show that there's absolutely no way that fire is going to come out of that altar unless it's God who does it.

[24 : 31] It's like the pastor, isn't it, who goes into a church that has never had the gospel and determines to change absolutely nothing except to bring real biblical ministry into that church so that nobody can say, oh, the fruit of what's happened here is because we changed the stuff we sing or we changed the former service or we did this or we did that or we did anything else.

It's not Laban who gives the blessing, it's God. And God still reveals his way of blessing to people, doesn't he?

He's told us that he will build his church however much the odds seem totally stacked against that. And real faith responds. Real trust responds with great expectation and looks to God to do what he promises.

But that, of course, does not mean, does it, indolence or inaction. And that is what the next section makes abundantly clear. Look at verses 31 down to the first verse of, verse 37 rather, down to the first verse of chapter 31.

It's all about Jacob's gain. It's a story of enterprise and enrichment. Jacob's strange enterprise with the flocks is met by God's sovereign enrichment of his whole household.

[25 : 53] What we're witnessing here is real practical faith. Jacob is testing God and proving that God is trustworthy. It is God's word proving true.

Now, if we read here from verse 37, John Calvin comments that at first the narration here may seem absurd. And indeed, it does seem absurd to many, doesn't it? It's given rise to all sorts of speculation as to what this whole process about the sticks was all about.

But don't miss the wood for the trees or the sticks even. Let's see the big picture. The main point here is surely very, very clear, isn't it? Somehow, from a totally monochrome flock, Jacob came to possess multicolored animals.

And secondly, these animals grew far greater in number and in strength so that Jacob's flock became disproportionately far, far bigger than Laban's. And thus, verse 43, the man increased greatly.

He spread abroad. Just those words that God had promised would be true of him in his dream at Bethel. In other words, this is God's promise being fulfilled through God's power and through God's blessing at work on Jacob's life.

[27 : 14] As God had blessed Laban because of Jacob's presence with him and caused his flocks to increase abundantly, so now he's blessing Jacob in exactly the same way.

Despite, despite the unfair oppressiveness of Laban's hand. It's interesting that the only other place that Moses uses this expression to spread abroad or increase abundantly is in Exodus chapter 1 where we read about the Israelites in Egypt.

The more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad, increased abundantly. So Moses' readers would be absolutely in no doubt what verse 43 here means.

God is blessing Jacob. He's enriching his faithful enterprise despite Laban's exploitation. So whatever else might be unclear about this process here, that much is totally clear.

The text is telling us God is doing this. This transfer of wealth from Laban to Jacob is God's doing. So we must be careful, must we, not to excoriate Jacob for what he's doing and his methods as some people seem very quick to do.

[28 : 27] We're excoriating God if we do that. Once again, I find William still absolutely on the button. He says this, Sentimentalists in religion, of whom there are many today, will think Jacob's stratagem wholly immoral.

But verses 10 to 13 of chapter 31 prove it is not so. The stratagem was from the Lord. It was God's sovereign blessing on Jacob.

But of course, the Lord does use means. Some sentimentalist Christians and sanctimonious Christians don't seem to think that. They don't seem to understand that. They say, Oh no, no, we mustn't do anything.

We must just pray to our sovereign God about all of this. Though the strange thing is that often people who say that sort of thing are people who very rarely make any appearance at church prayer meetings.

Well, of course we're to pray. Jesus teaches us to pray, doesn't he? Give us this day our daily bread. But what do we do then? We get up and we get out and we go out and earn our daily crust, don't we?

[29 : 32] And the New Testament tells us if we're not willing to do that, we shouldn't eat. We don't sit and expect God to feed us with daily bread that we don't earn. There's no contradiction there, is there, between prayer and action.

God uses means in normal circumstances to bless his people and here it was Jacob's wit and wisdom in selective breeding. It was Jacob's enterprise that was blessed by God.

Now what exactly it's all about, frankly, it is really quite hard to fathom. Some criticize Jacob for resorting to local pagan superstitions here, things that were common in the land.

Well, the text doesn't seem to criticize Jacob at all here as far as I can see. And in fact, if Jacob were simply resorting to local superstitious customs, surely Laban would have at least thought that this was a possibility and would have guarded against it, whereas he clearly seems to think there was absolutely no chance of Jacob getting one up on him.

Could be that there are some sort of scientific reasons at work here. There could be something in the plant bark or in the sap that would be like some sort of fertility drug, something that would alter the sheep and the goats Easter cycle or something.

[30 : 49] Might be something like that that was known to Jacob from Canaan but wasn't known to the locals here. Who knows? Might be just some folklore that was known in Canaan but not here that what the animals saw when they were in the breeding season somehow affected their embryos as though by power of imagination.

I've asked our livestock expert, that's Edward, and he tells me that at least in hens that's definitely not the case. So it seems unlikely. Although one does wonder, doesn't want to mean humans.

You get people now playing music to intrauterine babies thinking it'll help them to play the violin when they get older so who knows what the power of imagination can do. And I find also that parents who imagine that their spouse is very beautiful always seem to give birth to the most beautiful baby in the world, don't you?

So everybody's baby is always very beautiful and maybe what people think does affect it. The only problem with that is it's not always obvious to everybody else, is it? When I was born one of the elders in the church came to my mother and said to her, oh, that's the most ugly baby I've ever seen in my life.

I can see some of you might think there's reason for that. But I can tell you this, she never forgave him. She still speaks about it 45 years later, so I've really learned.

[32 : 11] I've thought that myself a few times but I've never said it. I don't know how all this worked, okay? But maybe that's exactly the point.

It seems quite unique in Scripture so maybe it was a unique thing that God told Jacob to do. I don't know. But whatever the exact process was, it was I think a practical response of faith.

Jacob knows and he's testified openly that God alone is the one who blesses. And he trusts the vision that God has given him about multiplying the speckled and the spotted animals and he uses his best endeavors and his know-how, whatever it is, whether it's specially revealed or not.

He uses that to pursue God's plan. And miraculously, we're told the flocks of white and brown goats by whatever means bring forth striped and speckled and spotted from nowhere.

And so Jacob says, well, praise the Lord for this marvelous thing and he uses his gifts and skills in husbandry to put the strongest animals to breed in front of these sticks so that God blesses and he just leaves Laban's animals to breed normally.

[33 : 34] And thus, verse 43, he increased greatly. Jacob is not breaking any agreement with Laban here. There was absolutely nothing to preclude Jacob's enterprises.

In fact, it was Laban's paranoia in moving his other flocks three days' journey away that helped the whole process go on in private. As the psalmist says, he who dug a pit fell into it himself.

His mischief returns on his own head. In fact, if you look at verses 7 and 8 of chapter 31, you'll see that Laban was observing Jacob's increase and he kept changing the goalposts ten times, Jacob said.

Oh no, not the spotted ones this year, Jacob, just the striped ones and they all bore striped. Oh no, no, not striped, just spotted. And what do you know, they all bore spotted. He kept moving the goalposts, but God kept putting the ball into the back of the net, wherever Laban put the net.

Rather like Didier Drogba last night. To Jacob's great enrichment, verse 43, turning his wealth in stock into household wealth, servants, camels, donkeys, and so on.

[34 : 46] Jacob's practical faith put God to the test trust. And he proved him true and faithful to his promise. And he blessed his enterprise abundantly.

And that is such an important lesson for us to learn today, isn't it? Because we also have a covenant calling from God to receive his blessing, but to be a blessing, a means of blessing to the world as we carry the gospel of Jesus Christ to the world.

The Lord has promised us the same way, I will be with you to the end of the age. But he calls us to believe, doesn't he, with practical faith, with enterprising faith that proves him true.

God uses means, and we're to use all the means that God has given us with all of our strength, with all of our wit and wisdom. We're not to imagine that we have no part at all to play in that process.

In mission, that was William Carey's great insistence, wasn't it, back in 1792, against many who thought that a sovereign God had no need for any use of means if he was going to convert the heathen?

[35 : 54] No, said Carey, the Lord said, all authority is given into me, but you go and preach the gospel. The beginning of the great missionary movement. And in missionary strategy, Paul the apostle used every possible means at his disposal, his personal gifts of speaking and writing, but the gifts afforded by travel and communication and language.

Strategic thinking about where he went, the great cities of the world, and all of these things. And God blessed Paul's enterprises. That's not wrong. God uses means.

Nor is it wrong. In fact, it's practical faith and trust in God to use your best wits and wisdom when you're up against devious and difficult opponents who want to inhibit and hinder the work of God's kingdom and his promise.

Paul didn't hesitate, did he, to use his rights under the law to protect himself, to protect the churches that he loved against those that were against him.

He used his Roman citizenship to the full. That's not, as sentimental people sometimes say, a Christian resorting to his own strength.

[37 : 05] That's nonsense. It's using all his God-given strength to utilize the gifts that God has given him and the opportunities that God has given him for the sake of the kingdom, exactly as Jacob did here, and exactly as we should do.

It was in the context of mission, wasn't it, that Jesus said, I'm sending you out as sheep among wolves, therefore you have to be as wise as serpents as well as as innocent as doves. That's exactly what Jacob's doing here, against the wolf that was Laban.

And God hands you, a providential advantage in a situation where the odds and the enemies are stacked against you. It's not pious and holy to eschew that and not use it.

The godly thing is to trust God and keep your powder dry, as Oliver Cromwell put it. He was right. Nehemiah said almost exactly the same thing.

Remember the Lord. Yes, we pray to our sovereign God and fight for the preservation of your wives, your families. Your city, God's house.

[38 : 13] And that is exactly what we're seeing here. God sovereignly blesses Jacob through his trusting and through his enterprising faith. faith. But, verse 1, he heard that all the sons of Laban were saying, Jacob has taken all that was our fathers and from what was our fathers he has gained all this wealth.

There's always a cost, isn't there, to blessing from God? There's the envy of God's enemies, for one thing. We see that in personal life, don't we? We see it also in church life, very often, sadly, where God is evidently blessing.

We see often others in the wider Christian community look on and assume something suspicious must be at work, something not right. What Laban's sons claimed was absolute nonsense, wasn't it?

Laban had very little when Jacob arrived. Everything that he now had was thanks to Jacob and thanks to God's blessing on him. Far from it being Jacob who had taken anything from Laban, it was God himself who had seen to it, both to teach Laban a lesson, which I'm not sure he learned, and to make it clear to everyone where real blessing in life comes from.

Real blessing comes only from the God of Jacob. And that's what verses 2 to 16 in chapter 31 are all about, Jacob's God.

[39 : 45] It's the focus of everything in this verse, in this passage, isn't it? And it explains everything that goes before. This part is all about explanation and endorsement.

Jacob's God-centered explanation to his wives both confirms God's endorsement on Jacob and also leads to a wholehearted godly endorsement by Jacob's wives of Jacob's call to go back to his land.

Verse 2, you see, shows us, doesn't it, that Jacob was in touch with reality in life. He saw that Laban's attitude had turned against them. But he's also spiritually attuned, isn't he, verse 3?

He heard God's voice too when God spoke and when he confirmed Jacob's instinct to go back to the land. Return, says the Lord, and I will be with you. And what a different Jacob we see now from chapter 29 and 30, don't we?

There he was a hapless victim in Laban's hands. There he was being bossed around and harried in his own household. But here we are and he's showing spiritual leadership at last. Calls his wives out to where all his wealth is displayed, out in the flocks and the fields, surrounded by the evidence of God's blessing.

[41 : 00] And he talks to them. And he puts it to them very clearly in verse 5. This has never been a contest, says Jacob, between me and your father. This has been a contest between your father and the God of my father, the Lord.

And the Lord has won now and forever. Verse 7, you see, I slaved for your father and he cheated me a dozen times. But God did not permit him to harm me.

Your father moved the goalposts all the time, verse 8. But God has taken away his livestock and given it to me. Do you notice the but God all the way through this passage, verse 5 and verse 7 and verse 9, again later on in verses 24 and 29.

It's one of the great phrases of the Bible, isn't it? You meant it for evil, Joseph would say all those years later, but God meant it for good. Jacob's explanation here, his testimony is all about God.

All that he says about his gain is God focused. He shares the dream of verses 10 to 12 with them. And he makes it absolutely clear that he owes everything to God, to God's grace, to God's sovereign blessing.

[42 : 18] There's not a hint, is there, in what he says to his wives? Look, I, clever Jacob, have outwitted your father. Not at all. It's exactly the reverse. Look at how God has pitied me in my poor, oppressed state.

And he's looked down on me and he has blessed me. That's always the genuine testimony of a true believer, isn't it?

Nothing about me. It's all about what God has done for me. There's no doubting the genuineness of Jacob's public testimony here to his wives. In fact, Moses deliberately uses language, I think, from the Exodus that would grip his hearers immediately.

I have seen all that Laban is doing, verse 12. And verse 9, God has taken away the livestock. God has delivered the livestock, is actually the word.

It echoes exactly Exodus chapter 3 where God said, I have seen my people's affliction and I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of Pharaoh. There's no doubting it.

[43 : 26] Jacob's testimony here is telling us all about God. And it shows us God's clear endorsement on Jacob's life.

He has been the one who has blessed Jacob. It's all been about what God is doing, not Jacob. And therefore, Jacob says, we must obey this God.

We must serve him alone. I can no longer stay here and serve Laban, verse 13. A real challenge, isn't it, verse 13, as Jacob reports it to his wives.

What's he saying? He's saying, where do you stand in this? Whose side are you on? Jacob's entreating his wives, isn't he, to choose not their father, but the God of his father.

This God commands us, says Jacob, to go with him, to leave all the comfort that you've known, to go out into the unknown, to a land that you've never been to. Now, will you choose life with me?

[44 : 33] That's what he's saying. It's a repeat of the question to Rebecca, his mother, in chapter 24. Will you go with this man? Well, like Rebecca, they do.

We don't belong here, they say. Our father has just sold us, he's devoured us. No doubt, part of their decision was disillusionment with Laban, their father. Just as many people today start searching for something more, don't they?

Because of disillusionment, because of disappointment in life, because there's a hunger for something more. But that's never enough, is it? And they recognize what Jacob is saying is the truth.

It's God who has done all this, they say in verse 16. We can't deny the reality of the evidence before our eyes. So whatever God says, Jacob, do it.

And we're with you. We're on your side, Jacob, because we want to be on the side of the God of your father, who alone is the source of blessing.

[45 : 39] You see how Laban's daughters here take exactly the opposite view of Jacob, God's chosen seed, the opposite view to their brothers. In verse 1, their brothers saw only Jacob.

They saw what Jacob had and they resented him. Jacob has taken away what was ours, they say. But you see here in verse 16, Jacob's wives, Laban's daughters, they see not just Jacob, whose faults and shortcomings they know better than absolutely anybody.

But they see Jacob's God and what he has done. They see the God who blesses his chosen seed and who will bless only through his chosen seed.

I will bless those who bless you, but those who dishonor you, I will curse. They're not being sentimental here. They're being realists, aren't they? They're facing reality. They're choosing the way of life and blessing.

They're choosing to cleave to God's chosen one and to belong to God's chosen family of faith. So whose side are you on?

[46 : 49] That was a life question always for Moses and his people. He was constantly putting it before them, wasn't he, as he led them through the wilderness out from their exile in Egypt towards their home in the promised land.

See, I set before you this day life and death, blessing and curse. Now choose life by loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice, holding fast to him because he is your life.

That was Moses' message. There was always a great pull back, wasn't there? Rosy-eyed notions of how good it really was way back in Egypt. Complaints about Moses, oh, he's just out for himself.

Let's choose another leader and go back to Egypt. He's taken away all that we once had. As if. Laban's sons all over again, that attitude. There was a live question in the New Testament church too, of course.

Read Paul's letters, read the epistle to the Hebrews. Paul's always attacked, isn't he? He's always maligned by first century sons of Laban who resent that God has chosen him to be a vehicle of blessing to all the families of the nations.

[47 : 58] Many, alas, even in the church, resented him and rejected him. Everyone has deserted me, he says to Timothy. But just like Jacob, the Lord did not abandon him.

The Lord stood by him and strengthened him so that through him the message of his God would be proclaimed and heard and believed by the Gentiles just as Jacob's Gentile wives here heard Jacob's testimony and cleaved to the God of his fathers.

God's great blessing and in the midst of his work to increase greatly, to spread abroad his people.

When we find that in the midst of that blessing, adversity always comes because blessing and adversity always come together. We need not fear though when the sons of Laban are quick to resent and malign.

Or when the Labans of this world will no longer regard us with favor. God's covenant promise to Jacob and to his family to bless them and to bless through them is still trustworthy.

[49 : 11] It's still being fulfilled. And we have far more and greater promises even than those Jacob had. We have joined ourselves for our blessing not to Jacob with all his faults but to Jesus.

to the ultimate promised seed of God, to our Savior, to the God of Jacob made fully known forever to all peoples everywhere. And he, the risen Lord Jesus Christ, has repeated that promise to us.

I will be with you even to the end of the age, that is to the end of your exile, until you come home into his glorious kingdom forever.

forever. So we needn't fear. We needn't fear as a church, even though God should call us out of our comfort zone in obedience to his commands.

We have his promise. We've seen everything that he's done for us thus far. We can trust him with our future in enterprising practical faith.

[50 : 17] But as we close, let me ask that question just one more time. Whose side are you on? It's very easy, isn't it, to criticize the church today, including this church.

Many do. We're far from perfect, believe me. We know that. Just as Jacob had many flaws and Jacob knew it too. But for all his flaws, to side with Jacob and with his people was to side with Jacob's God, the God of blessing, the only true God and the only source of blessing in this life and in eternity.

It was to trust not in Jacob, but in his God and in the promise of his saving seed, through whom alone this world and its people can know blessing and can know life and can know life eternal.

that seed has come and Jesus Christ, our Lord, he is building his church. No Laban in this world and not even the gates of hell will ever prevent that, says Jesus.

And God will bless all those who bless him. He will bless them abundantly and gloriously. but he will curse those who dishonor him, who dishonor his beloved son, who came and shed his own blood for the people of this world.

[51 : 59] Jesus himself told another story also about sheep and goats that makes that very, very plain. You can read it in Matthew chapter 25. Don't side with Laban's sons.

Don't just see the church's faults. They're very real and they're abundant. Listen to Laban's daughters and see the church's savior and bless him and follow him and you will find blessing abundantly.

and forever. Let's pray. All the wealth that God has taken away from our father belongs to us and to our children.

Now then, whatever God has said to you, do. Heavenly father, help us to see that you have given every blessing and every honor and all glory and the highest name above every name to your son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

May we in following him and in choosing life with him, discover the joy and the wonder of what it means to be the Israel of God.

[53 : 36] For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.