

## 38. The hard and humbling road of holiness (2007)

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Preacher: William Philip

[ 0 : 00 ] Well, let's turn to our reading this morning, and we're back into Genesis, and looking this morning at Genesis chapter 29, it's page 23 on our church Bibles, if you have one of those, and we're going to read through to verse 30.

Well, I'm going to start at verse 20 of, or verse 18 of chapter 28.

Early in the morning, Jacob took the stone that had been put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called the name of that place Bethel, but the name of the city was Luz at the first.

And Jacob made a vile, saying, if God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God.

And this stone which I've set up for a pillar shall be God's house, and of all that you give me, I will give a full tenth to you. And Jacob went on his journey, literally, it says, Jacob picked up his feet and he came to the land of the people of the east.

[ 1 : 19 ] And he looked, and he saw a well in the field, and behold, three flocks of sheep lying beside it. For out of that well the flocks were watered. The stone in the well's mouth was large, and when all the flocks were gathered there, the shepherds would roll the stone from the mouth of the well and water the sheep, and put the stone back in its place over the mouth of the well.

Jacob said to them, my brothers, where do you come from? They said, we're from Haram. He said to them, do you know Laban, the son of Nahor? They said, we know him.

He said to them, is it well with him? They said, it's well. And see, Rachel, his daughter's coming with the sheep. He said, behold, it's still high day. It's not time for the livestock to be gathered together. Water the sheep and go pasture them. But they said, we cannot until all the flocks are gathered together, and the stone is rolled from the mouth of the well. Then we water the sheep.

While he was still speaking with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep, for she was a shepherdess. Now, as soon as Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of Laban, his mother's brother, and the sheep of Laban, his mother's brother, Jacob came near and rolled the stone from the well's mouth and watered the flock of Laban, his mother's brother.

[ 2 : 37 ] Then Jacob kissed Rachel and wept aloud. And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's kinsman, that he was Rebekah's son. And she ran and told her father.

As soon as Laban heard the news about Jacob, his sister's son, he ran to meet him and embraced him and kissed him and brought him to his house. Jacob told Laban all these things. And Laban said to him, surely you are my bone and my flesh.

And he stayed with him a month. Then Laban said to Jacob, because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?

Now Laban had two daughters. The name of the older was Leah and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah's eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance.

Jacob loved Rachel. And he said, I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter, Rachel. Laban said, it's better that I give her to you than that I should give her to another man.

[ 3 : 49 ] Stay with me. So Jacob served seven years for Rachel. And they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her. Then Jacob said to Laban, give me my wife that I may go into her for my time is completed.

So Laban gathered all the people of the place and made a feast. But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob and he went into her.

Laban gave his female servant Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her servant. And in the morning, behold, it was Leah. And Jacob said to Laban, what is this that you have done to me?

Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me? Laban said, it's not so done in our country to give the younger before the firstborn.

Complete the week of this one and we'll give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years. Jacob did so and completed her week.

[ 5 : 03 ] Then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to be his wife. Laban gave his female servant Bilhah to his daughter Rachel to be her servant. So Jacob went into Rachel also.

And he loved Rachel rather than Leah, you should say. And served Laban for another seven years. Amen. May God bless to us his word. Well, if you turn with me to the chapter we read, Genesis 29, which is a chapter all about the hard and humbling road of holiness.

Earlier in the week I was having my breakfast and I just got fed up with the incessant whinging and carping of the presenters of the Today program on Radio 4.

So I started flicking over the channels to find something else to listen to. I pressed one button and I came across even more trivial whinging and carping on Radio Scotland.

[ 6 : 09 ] So I moved on again and pressed another button. And this time I nearly got blasted into my cornflakes by a very loud heavy rock band. It rather took me back to my youth.

I listened for a bit and then I realized, no, I really am a middle-aged man now. And I switched over to Classic FM. But I have to say that the chorus of that rock song did rather make an impression on me.

It went like this. There ain't no way but the hard way, so get used to it. There ain't no way but the hard way, but get used to it. I don't know if you know that song.

I don't know who the band are, but there we are. I couldn't help thinking that in one sense, that is the very realistic message of the Bible about so much of the Christian life.

Certainly it was a constant theme that Moses taught his people about. About what it was meant, what it meant to be God's chosen people.

[ 7 : 07 ] A people who are holy to the Lord. Deuteronomy chapter 8, he says this. You shall remember, remember they're just on the brink of going into the promised land.

You shall remember the whole way the Lord led you these 40 years in the wilderness that he might humble you. He humbled you and let you hunger that he might make you know that man lives not by bread alone, but by everything that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

Know then in your heart, said the Lord, that as a man disciplines his son, so the Lord disciplines you. And Moses is teaching the same truth here in Genesis as he was there in Deuteronomy.

To show his people that it's always been the same way with God and with the chosen ones that he loves. He shows us, doesn't he, in the story of the patriarchs, he shows us God's tenacious grace. His commitment absolutely to his plan and purpose of salvation. Despite the many failings and the many failures of his people. His plan is to remove the curse, to transform the world for glory.

[ 8 : 24 ] To bless all nations through them. And he will stick to it. But he is also just as clear that his grace is a transforming grace for his people.

He's committed not just to work through his chosen people, but to work in them, to transform them for glory. God cares, you see, not just about his plans, but he cares about his people.

And that's not just Moses' message, of course not. It's the message of the whole New Testament, just as clearly. Because, of course, the gospel of Moses and the gospel of Jesus are the same gospel. So listen to Hebrews 12, verse 10.

God disciplines us for our good, says the apostle, that we might share his holiness. You shall be holy because I am holy.

That's the great command and the promise of God in the Old Testament, but also in the New Testament. Where it's an even better promise, and therefore an even greater command, because of the finished work of Jesus Christ, our Savior.

[ 9 : 36 ] And so it has always been. And so also has the road to holiness always been a hard and a humbling road.

And let me tell you, it still is in the year 2012. And that's what we see in the life of Jacob, and that's what we see very pointedly here in our story today.

We saw last time the beginning of Jacob's real walk with God, with that personal encounter with God at Bethel, and with his personal and very public response to God. The Lord shall be my God, he said.

He will own me. That's what verse 22 of chapter 28 means. I give a tithe tangibly to the Lord to show that I truly and everything belong to him now.

I'm his servant. It's a wonderful beginning, as it always is in the first flushes of faith of a new believer. But it is just the beginning, isn't it?

[10:39] And what we discover is that because we are now sons of God, God wants his sons and daughters to share his holiness. It's just the beginning of a hard and very humbling road of holiness.

Because every true believer really is a son of God, then there ain't no way but the holy way.

But because every believer, like you and me, is still also a sinner, then alas, the truth is, very often the only way we are able to learn that is the hard way. Well, that's true for me anyway.

That we are being humbled in the hands of the Lord for the holiness, which the apostle says, without which no one, no one will see the Lord. Well, that's what this story is all about, friends.

So let's look at it in some detail. It's a story about a well of discovery and then a wedding of deception. And it's all about a work of discipline. Look at verses 1 to 14.

[11:43] First of all, Jacob's promising discovery at the well. It's another story, isn't it, of God's marvelous providence. The repetition of the delightful pattern here speaks of God's marvelous providence, which is always at work to further his plan of grace through his chosen people.

It's true, isn't it? God's providence so often delights us and heartens us. There is real joy, isn't there, for every believer to know that we share a part in the calling of God's people, God's calling to be part of his great transformation and redemption of this world.

And especially when we're in the first flush of faith as a new Christian, there is great joy in just knowing that that is true. And that's so clearly, I think, the sense of these verses here.

Verse 1 says, literally, as I said, Jacob picked up his feet. There's a real spring in Jacob's step after the experience at Bethel. And in no time, it seems, he's traveled hundreds of miles to the east.

And immediately, verse 2, there's a great sign, isn't there, of God's presence with him, just as he promised. Look, verse 2, there's a well and a whole bunch of sheep around it.

[12:57] Well, surely Jacob's confidence and his faith in his newfound God is riding high here. Here's a well. Jacob knows a great story about a well, doesn't he?

And his parents, a well in the east where his mother was found for his father. He knows that great story. And, of course, Moses' readers know plenty of stories about encounters at wells, including one that involved Moses himself.

You can read about it in Exodus chapter 2. They knew that story, too, where Moses, fleeing from Egypt, comes across a well and a bunch of rather boorish shepherds. And he plays the hero and rescues the women who are the daughters of a man of Midian.

And into the bargain, Moses finds a wife out of that. Well, it's a little bit like that here. Here's some shepherds. And verse 3 seems to suggest they're not really the most active workers, are they?

Seems like this is a pretty heavily unionized outfit, this well. There's a huge stone over it, we're told. Now, that's not just to stop people falling in. It's to regulate the water supply. Everybody has to wait, we're told.

[14:04] Everybody has to water their sheep at the same time, the same way. Can't have anyone having any unfair advantage at this well. There's none of your Anglo-Saxon deregulation here.

It's union rules at this well. I think it's the sort of well the French would really love. Probably Monsieur Hollande would really love this well. And maybe they'll all be like that in France if he wins today, I don't know.

But at any rate, here's Jacob, a traveling foreigner. And he tries to converse with these guys hanging about the well. He's very polite, isn't he? My brothers, he says.

Where are you from? All he gets is a rather monosyllabic answer. Haran. As if to say, well, where on earth do you think we're from? Timbuktu? This is the well of Haran, for goodness sake.

So he tries again. Oh, Haran. His heart must have leapt at hearing that, wasn't it? Do you know my mother's brother? Do you know Laban, Nahor's son?

[15:01] We know him, they said, as they carry on chewing their gum and just spitting and not being very interested. Well, tell us how he is then. Give me the lowdown on the family.

Give me the heads up. What's going on? You can sense Jacob is full of excitement here. He's fine, they say. Anyway, look. There's his daughter.

Why don't you ask her? I think Jacob's getting rather frustrated, isn't he? Because if you look at verse 7, he seems to try one last time. Why aren't you guys working, he says?

Why are you wasting the day? Why not just water your sheep and get on with your work? And that really goes down like a lead balloon, verse 8. We can't do that.

There's rules here, buster, you know? There's ways that we do things here. And that isn't it. We wait for everyone. And then we water the sheep.

[15:58] That's the way we've always done things here. That's the way it's always going to be. Okay? Maggie Thatcher had obviously never been to the well of Haran, I don't think. Sounds like they could have done with her.

Actually, it's an important point being made here, isn't it? Because Jacob's entrepreneurial spirit and Jacob's skill in livestock management is going to be a very important part of the story.

He was a man with get up and go. Anyway, verse 9. While he's still speaking with them, here comes Rachel with her father's sheep.

And boy, does she have an effect on Jacob. We're not told yet, are we? Just yet in the story. But we know that Rachel is an absolute stunner.

But more than this, she is Laban's daughter. And Jacob knows that here. And these are Laban's sheep. You see in verse 10 how we keep getting Laban's name coming up again and again. This is God's doing, you see.

[17:01] Jacob recognizes that God's hand of providence has brought me right here to this well. And here are my very own family and their sheep. This is the very place my parents have sent me to.

So Jacob then decides to show these shepherds how a real man gets to work. And single-handedly, he breaks this picket line and he heaves that huge stone aside.

The health and safety notice on the front says, only to be moved by at least five men. And no fireman must be involved in case you break your back. But Jacob just runs straight up and heaves this enormous stone away.

And before you know it, he's watered the whole of Laban's flock, his mother's son. Remember, she was that ten camel woman that thought nothing of watering all those camels all those year before. And no doubt, Jacob here is quite eager to impress Rachel, this stunning girl. But perhaps above all, he's out to please, isn't he? He's out to show his worth as a valuable guy, somebody with energy and resourcefulness, somebody with wits.

[18:09] As he meets his distant family. Well, it works because Rachel runs to tell Laban and Laban comes running out himself. No doubt, Laban, remember, that the last time somebody came from this faraway family, they were laden with gold and jewels and gifts.

Remember? But not this time. Verse 13. We're told that Jacob told Laban all these things. We're not told exactly what he did tell him. No doubt, he had to explain to him what he was doing there and his relative penury, his lack of means. We don't know what version of the story he told, but clearly he would be keen to show, wouldn't he, that he was a worthy relative to seek Laban's daughter in marriage.

That was a big part of his mission. He'd come to find a daughter of Laban, to be his wife. And it seems, doesn't it, that all is well. Verse 14.

He's accepted into the family. He stays for a month in relative comfort and peace. Jacob's faith, surely at this point, must be buoyant, don't you think? God's presence is manifestly with him.

[19:22] He's led him right to the right place. And God's plan seems to be unfolding absolutely wonderfully. And he's rejoicing in that. A lot of the commentators can't resist slamming Jacob here.

They want to contrast this scene with the scene at the well in chapter 24. They make a huge big deal of the fact that, unlike Abraham's servant, Jacob doesn't seem to stop and pray at every point. And that, unlike Abraham's servant, Jacob doesn't set a proper test for this woman, a test of moral character and so on. And they say things like, well, he's only interested in her beauty.

And that's a great sign of Jacob's unspirituality here. Come on, guys, show a bit of humanity. Show a bit of reality. I don't know why these commentators are so obsessed with that.

I don't know whether they've all got ugly wives or something, and they want to try and convince themselves that, you know, having a beautiful wife is a mark of ungodliness. I don't know. But I do think that's a lot of over-pious nonsense.

[20:29] It seems to me here that surely the overwhelming thing isn't the contrast with chapter 24, but it's the similarity. Here is the same God's marvelous providence at work.

And he's delighting the heart of Jacob just as he delighted the heart of Isaac's servant. And just as God so often delights our hearts, so often.

And especially so when we're new to the Christian faith. You know that, don't you? Look back to your early days of Christian faith. And there were many times, weren't there, where God's presence and his blessing was just so obvious to you.

And it brought such joy and happiness to your heart. And surely the evidence is here that Jacob is expressing that heartfelt joy at God's goodness. Surely he's praising God.

We're told that he weeps and he embraces this long-lost family of his. Surely the natural way to read that is that that's Jacob's way of expressing his joy and his gladness to God.

[ 21 : 35 ] At what God has so manifestly done for him. I think Jacob has just built an altar. He's just made a vow to God. Well, it seems extraordinary to me that just because he doesn't use exactly the same words in prayer as Abraham's servant, somehow he's terribly unspiritual and ungodly.

Just because he doesn't use the precise evangelical language that we want him to use. You need to be careful about that. Sometimes Christians can be terribly wooden and sanctimonious and unnatural.

Just because somebody doesn't use exactly the right words of our evangelical parlance, I'm not really sure they're a proper Christian. When evidently their life is full of the joy and the gladness and the delight in the Lord.

They just perhaps don't have the language as you do to express it that way. Now here is a joyful Jacob. And he's rejoicing in God's marvelous providence.

He's full of joy at his calling to be part of God's great unfolding plan. But notice for all the joy, there is a difference from chapter 24, isn't there?

[ 22 : 43 ] Because nothing yet has been mentioned about marriage. And Jacob doesn't have lots of gifts and gold to offer as a dowry. He might have made a great entrance to Haran, rolling away that stone.

But as one writer says, there are many huge obstacles to be rolled away still before he can return to his land in peace. And his uncle Laban is going to prove to be one of those major obstacles, as we see in the next scene, verses 15 to 30.

And the focus here is all about Laban's painful deception at the wedding. Here we have a story not about marvelous providence, but about the very mysterious providence of God.

Again, it's a story of repetition, isn't it? But repetition of a deceitful plot, which speaks of God's mysterious providence, which also is always at work for his purposes of grace in his chosen people. Yes, God's providence does often delight us and hearten us. And often God's providence leads us to shed tears of joy. But God's providence also disciplines us and humbles us.

[ 23 : 59 ] And it may also lead us to tears of pain. The pain of sharing in the calling to be a people who are being transformed for holiness, for the glory of God, so that we might shine with his real beauty.

And only a humbled people can be a holy people. And the truth is that humility, especially for able men, for gifted men, for men like Jacob, humility only comes the hard way.

And in Laban, we see Jacob more than meeting his match, don't we? Jacob was a man with his eye on the main chance. And absolutely, that was Laban.

And boy, was verse 14 true. You, Jacob, are my bone and my flesh. These two men were absolutely peas out of the same pod. They were smooth, manipulating operators by nature.

But Laban was a good deal longer in the tooth and a good deal more experienced than Jacob. And in this unfolding situation, it was Laban who had been delivered the upper hand.

[ 25 : 09 ] So here in verse 15, Laban sees that the con is on. And he starts roping in his mark. I don't know if any of you watch that TV series, *The Hustle*, or *Hustle* it's called.

I don't have a TV, but I do enjoy from time to time watching things on the iPlayer. And *Hustle* is one of my favorites. If you've seen it, it's about a gang of con artists. And they always choose their mark, their victim, by seeking somebody who is really greedy or really desperate for something.

They're so desperate for it that, in fact, they'll be able to be blinded by the con trick that's being played on them. Well, in Jacob, Laban had found a perfect mark.

Because he's shown all his cards already to Laban, hasn't he? Laban knows that Jacob has got a weak point. He needs to have a wife from Laban. And he's also seen that he's fallen for Rachel big time.

And he knows that Jacob has got nothing to offer, no dairy money. So he's ripe for the picking. So verse 15, he says to Jacob, let's talk wages, Jacob.

[ 26 : 14 ] It sounds like he's being very generous, of course. Should you serve me for nothing? But he's not being generous, very ambiguous, this. If Laban was really being generous, he would have said, look, Jacob, you're my nephew.

You're one of the family. I'm going to invite you into the family firm. And you can be a partner with me. That's not what he says, is it? No, he's going to exploit him as a servant, a mere servant getting wages.

By the way, that verb serve is a key term all the way through the story of Jacob's time in Haran. He becomes an indentured servant, a slave, really, to Laban.

The Israelites listening would certainly recognize that word, wouldn't they? They knew all about slavery, slavery in the land of Egypt. So name your wages, says Laban.

Well, what's Jacob going to say? Does Laban suspect? I think he most certainly does, because he's a very canny man. I think he knows exactly what Jacob is going to say. But first, what's this, verse 16?

[ 27 : 19 ] Well, this is a great storyteller, isn't he? We're all thinking, what's going to happen with Jacob and Rachel? And all of a sudden, we have this twist. It's not just Rachel. There's two sisters.

There's an older sister called Leah. And, oh dear, poor Leah isn't a stunner like Rachel. In fact, it seems that poor Leah is really rather ugly.

Nobody really knows what this means about her having weak eyes or difficult eyes. I certainly don't think it means her sight is bad. So don't worry if you wear glasses. It doesn't mean that you're not attractive. Well, I did think about putting my contact lenses on this morning.

Maybe she was cross-eyed or something. I don't know. We don't know. But whatever it was, she had something funny with her eyes. And she just wasn't attractive. And that was a problem for poor Leah.

But it was also a problem for Laban, because Laban would find it very difficult to get a husband for Leah. So when Jacob came out with verse 18, you can almost hear the cogs starting to go around in Laban's head, can't you?

[ 28 : 28 ] Wow. This is a win-win for me. I can get seven years' work out of Jacob. And because he's a foreigner, because he doesn't understand our marriage customs, I'm going to be able to dump Leah on him and kill two birds with one stone.

Look at how crookedly Laban deals with Jacob. What's Laban's reply in verse 19, do you see? He doesn't say, Okay, it's a deal. Rachel will be yours.

He just says, Better I give her to you than to somebody else. He doesn't say yes, does he? He doesn't even mention Rachel's name. Do you see that? But he does say yes to the seven years of labor.

And that is a huge price. A huge price. Later on in the Law of Moses, he said a maximum bride price, a maximum dairy of 50 shekels. That was about the same as three or three and a half years of work.

So this is double that. Seven years. Very often, actually, it would have been a lot less than 50 shekels. But Laban doesn't say, Oh dear boy, that's ridiculous.

[ 29 : 41 ] Half it, three years would be the normal. And since you're a family, let's just cut it down to two. Not a chance. He's taking all seven. And he kept him to it, verse 20. Do you see?

Now again, in Deuteronomy chapter 15, Moses teaches that an indentured servant must be released for the Jubilee after six years, freely and without being held.

But he's kept for the full seven. But look at the second half of verse 20. They seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.

Isn't that romantic? Automatic? That's the sort of comment that if Jacob had written down in a little note to Rachel, she'd have framed it, wouldn't she? And put it on the wall in her bedroom somewhere.

I know what you women do. That is the sort of thing you do. Men, if you want to, if you want to really get a good reaction with your wife, write them a little note with something like that.

[ 30 : 36 ] You know, we've been married 20 years, but it seemed just like a few days because of my love for you. She'll frame it. Or she'll put it in a little locket and wear it around her neck. It'll go down a treat.

So I'm told anyway. I've no experience of these things. The Bible is so realistic, isn't it? What a lovely touch that is. The Bible understands us as men and women.

And actually, verse 21, I think, is certainly a verse that the men will understand. After seven years, there's no beating about the bush with Jacob. Give me my wife, he says. Maybe Jacob is beginning to be a bit suspicious of Laban.

There's a slight note of desperation there. It's a bit like chapter 30, verse 1, when Rachel says, Give me a child or I die. So perhaps he's getting a bit concerned, but he is certainly desperate for Rachel.

I want to go into her, he says. In other words, he says, I want to be bodily united with her. I don't want just the thought of it. Well, that's natural, isn't it? And it's right.

[ 31 : 41 ] And seven years is a long, long time to wait. I mean, these days, people won't wait seven days before they want to jump into bed. Seven years is a long time. It's too long, isn't it?

Long engagements are a very bad thing. And I do want to say this. I always say to couples who are thinking of getting married, don't get engaged and wait and wait and wait and wait.

It's a very, very bad thing to do. It puts incredible strain on you. I want to say to parents, when your children want to get married, don't insist that they have a horrendously long engagement so that you can have the wedding that you want them to have.

It's hard for them. Be realistic. The Bible's much more realistic than that. But Jacob managed it, a Herculean task, for seven years.

But he was counting. And at last, things are looking up. And it is all going to be so, so great. Give me my wife that I may go into her, for my time is completed.

[ 32 : 41 ] And boy, was Jacob a happy, happy man. Now Laban, you notice, doesn't answer, does he? But he does arrange a wedding, all properly and publicly, and he makes a feast.

And by the way, that word feast implies that quite a lot of drinking would have been going on. And that may well explain at least something of what follows and how it happened. It's a great celebration.

And it culminates in Laban giving his daughter, fully veiled, of course, as she would be, giving her to Jacob. And off they go into the darkness of the bridal chamber.

And everything looks exactly as it ought to be. Father gives a wedding gift of a maidservant to his daughter. And it's all absolutely wonderful.

And you can bet that Jacob was absolutely on cloud nine. And then the next morning, verse 25, Jacob wakes up, he rolls over, he rubs the sleep out of his eyes, and he gazes at the face of his beloved.

[ 33 : 53 ] And behold, you'll probably translate that, It was Leah.

And smiling sheepishly back at him was not the lover of his life, but poor, probably ugly, Leah. It's not the first time, is it?

And it won't be the last time that a man wakes up the next morning next to somebody that he thought was a goddess the night before when he had a big drink in him. And in the cold light of day, it looks very, very different.

But this is, this is utterly devastating to Jacob. What have you done to me? He shouts at Laban.

And can you believe Laban?

He is as cool and calculating as ever. Oh, did I forget to mention the way that we do things here?

Oh, we like our traditions, you know. Like at the well, yes?

[ 34 : 54 ] Sorry, I thought that you were a clever chap. I thought you'd grasp that. But don't worry, there's a good chap. Don't spoil the rest of the wedding week celebrations. We've got a wedding to celebrate.

We don't want any glum faces with all their neighbors around. Keep it sweet. Keep it sweet, Jacob.

And you can have Rachel for another seven years, of course. Jacob had no choice, did he?

He's been well and truly had. He gets Rachel, but all the joy of discovery is embittered by the pain and that dreadful deception.

And this time, you can be absolutely sure that seven years of hard labor did not at all feel like just one day. It felt like seven bitter, hard years. So verse 30, he had Rachel and he loved her rather than Leah.

He'd never loved Leah. But as Derek Kidner put it so deftly, the story ends with the very embodiment of anticlimax, a miniature of man's disillusionment experienced from Eden onwards.

[ 36 : 07 ] Well, we'll come next time to the consequences of all this in a household where the story unfolds with just more and more misery as the years go on. But just for now, surely we need to ask the question, what is God doing?

What is going on? Why is this happening? That must have been what Jacob was saying, don't you think? It's a question also that we often find our own lips, isn't it?

Pretty frequently in our own lives. What is God doing? Well, God doesn't speak in this story. Did you notice that? Not audibly anyway.

He doesn't appear. But he is present with Jacob just as he promised, just not in the way that Jacob envisaged he would be. And the text does explain to us what God is saying, subtly, but nevertheless very clearly.

The whole story with its echoes of the delightful pattern at the well in the past and in the deceptive plot in the family in the past which is repeated here.

[ 37 : 13 ] That's what's telling us what all this is about. It's telling us that Jacob's promising discovery at the well and Laban's painful deception at the wedding is all part of God's purposeful discipline at work in Jacob's life.

God's providence at work in Jacob's life to discipline him and to humble him and to transform him by grace for his good so that he will share in God's holiness.

Let me just try and draw together what Moses' message is for his people and what the Holy Spirit's message is for us as Christ's people today in our own day in our own lives. First, he wants us to see that all sin hurts.

He wants us to see that we don't have power over sin in our lives but sin has power over us and it will haunt us and it will hurt us and it will harm us especially where those sins are relational sins. Sins against other people. Especially sins against people who are close to us. These things can have a terrible entail of hurt that has consequences that will dog us long into the future.

[ 38 : 31 ] And there's no getting away from that in this story or in our lives. That is a fact. Jacob falls into Laban's power because of what Jacob had done to his father Isaac and his brother Esau.

He wouldn't have been there otherwise. Certainly not at Laban's mercy like this. And Isaac's favoritism of Jacob over Esau that at least in part led to the great deception back in chapter 27 that is now being repeated in Jacob's favoritism of Rachel over his other wife Leah.

And that too is going to break out into all sorts of tragedy later on in the story of Joseph and his brothers. It's going to break old Jacob's heart. We're seeing that as well, aren't we, in David's story that Bob's preaching to us in 2 Samuel.

The consequences of David's sin with Bathsheba that go on cascading down in the family life of that clan. What does the Apostle James say?

We're all tempted by self-desire. And desire, he says, when it is conceived, gives birth to sin. And sin, when it is fully grown, brings forth death.

[ 39 : 45 ] Don't be deceived, my brothers. And says, Paul, God is not mocked. You reap what you sow. Sin hurts. It hurts you.

It hurts the people you love. And the sins of God's people hurt God's people. Hurt them now and can go on hurting them for a long, long, long time.

Don't deceive yourself. But don't despair either because in God's hands, secondly, the sin that hurts can humble us.

Things are not out of control in this story and things are not out of control in your life or my life when the joy of God's marvelous providence in our lives turn into perplexity at his mysterious providence that seems to have come over us all of a sudden.

God will use even our sins and even those devastating consequences, he will use them to discipline us and to humble us because we are his children and because he loves us.

[ 40 : 53 ] He will allow some of these disasters that our sin has set in motion, he will allow them to roll on in a way that horrifies us but not because he hates us, not because he's punishing us, but because he loves us, because he's purifying us and perfecting us for an eternal, everlasting blessing.

Can you believe that? About your own life? But that is what God is telling us right here in his word. He led you in the wilderness forty years.

He let you hunger, said Moses, because as a man disciplines his son, so the Lord your God disciplines you. And the apostle in Hebrews says exactly the same thing.

For the Lord disciplines the one that he loves and chastises every son he receives. It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons.

He disciplines us for our good that we may share his holiness. And for the moment, all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant. But later, it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness.

[ 42 : 14 ] You see, he disciplines those that he loves who are his true sons and daughters. But no discipline, no discipline is pleasant.

It's all painful. And the reason, friends, that so much of it is desperately painful is that it involves God's humbling us by confronting us face to face with our own sinfulness, up close and personal. In a way that's devastatingly painful at times. Because that's often the only way that you and I can see the truth about us that God can see and that often other people also can see but we can hardly ever see.

And it humbles us. It floors us. It silences us. It snuffs out all our pride, all our presumption, all our self-righteousness. Isn't that what we see so devastatingly for Jacob here?

Look at verse 25 again. You have deceived me, he says to Laban. And as soon as those words are out of his mouth, don't you think he felt hit in the pit of his stomach with that dreadful feeling that you feel so suddenly when you know you've been exposed?

[ 43 : 34 ] Like the flash of the speed camera in your rear view mirror when you've shot past it at speed and you realize you've been had. Jacob, the great deceiver, is deceived.

And he is hit instantly by the feeling of misery that Esau felt, that Isaac, his father, felt when they were deceived with a veiled identity in the dark after a great meal and plenty of wine exactly the same way.

And verse 26 just rubs it in even further, doesn't it? Do you see? In our country, says Laban, we don't let the rights of the firstborn be supplanted just like that, no matter how superior the younger sibling might be.

Do you see what God is doing with Jacob through Laban's treachery? He's holding a mirror up to Jacob and he's saying, do you see, Jacob? Do you see? I'm showing you yourself.

It's you. Do you like what you see, Jacob? Are you proud of what you see in the mirror? This is the man that I opened heaven and came down on the stairway at Bethel to bless and to give promises to.

[ 44 : 57 ] Are you the man that deserves that kind of thing from me, Jacob? Painful. It's devastating, isn't it, to have that happen to you.

Has that ever happened to you? In your Christian life, God held up that mirror to face you with what your sin looks like? It happened to me.

I can tell you there's nothing so humbling as to be tormented by a terrible Laban-like person in your life and then for God to suddenly open your eyes like he did to King David and say, you are the man.

It's you. This is you. This is what you're like. But friends, God does that to us sometimes.

Thank God that he does because in his infinite mercy he uses even our sins, sins that harm and hurt and he uses them for good to humble us, to discipline us because he loves us because he wants to transform us so that we will share his holiness.

[ 46 : 18 ] It's painful. Desperately painful as it was for Jacob here as he faced the reality about himself and his own heart. Just as it was for Simon Peter.

Do you remember when Jesus turned and looked at him and stared at him and Peter suddenly saw as in a mirror the truth about what he had done in denying Jesus three times and he went out and wept bitterly.

Just as it was painful for Simon Peter again on the beach by the lake of Galilee when by the same fire of coals Jesus repeated that scene of denial with Peter and three times asked him that question.

Peter, do you love me? See, God, God is the great sin therapist, isn't he?

And out of our greatest sins he works discipline to humble us. And that's because, thirdly, in his hands even the sin that hurts can humble us and therefore work holiness in us.

[ 47 : 34 ] That we might share his holiness as the apostle. That means so that we might become like Jesus. And that's what God's doing with Jacob here.

I said the word serve and service was so prominent here. Why? Because Jacob is learning to be a servant. There's irony, of course, isn't there?

Because in the promise that God gave in the oracle about these two brothers it was told Esau the older will serve the younger Jacob. But here's Jacob serving as a slave to his uncle Laban.

And that's the point, isn't it? Because in God's economy his promised chosen seed whom all the world will serve he himself will be the servant of all, won't he?

The son of man came not to be served but to serve said the Lord Jesus Christ. And Jacob was the chosen seed in his generation.

[ 48 : 40 ] He was God's anointed one. He was to be the focus of God's great blessing. He was to be honored by all as such, yes. And he did hold in a very real way the keys to Bethel, to the gate of heaven.

That meant that he had to learn how to be the true servant of God, to share his true holiness.

And so it is, friends, for every true servant of the Lord Jesus Christ in every age, for every true seed of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, for all who are in Jesus Christ and will reign with him over all in glory one day.

And that's why, as Derek Kidner says, Jacob is not the only person to have needed a Laban in his life. Where is God in all this terrible injustice that I'm facing in my life?

Lord, please take this awful Laban-like person away. Or maybe, just maybe, when you're saying that in your life and praying that, maybe he's telling you something about your sin and its hurtfulness and its power to bring misery and destruction and pain to others.

[ 50 : 08 ] Maybe he's just teaching you that that terrible pain that you're experiencing, the gossip that people are saying about you is just like the other people's pain in the gossip that you've told about them.

Or the lies that they're telling about you are just like the painful dart that those lies that you've told about others bring to them. Or the unfaithfulness of friends who are deserting you, just like the unfaithfulness when you have deserted friends before.

And if so, friends, God is holding up that mirror to your life, painful as it is. He's doing it because he loves you.

He's doing it because he wants to humble you, to make you like his son, the Lord Jesus, to share his holiness, his true and beautiful humanness.

It's painful. It can't not be painful. There ain't no way, not the hard way, for most of us anyway, because we're sinners.

[ 51 : 22 ] It'll never be pleasant. But get used to it, Moses is saying. If you're a real Christian, and because God does love you, you will experience both his marvelous providence, and his mysterious providence in your life.

He will delight you. He will hearten you and bring you joy. But he will also discipline you and humble you.

Those whom I love, says the risen Lord Jesus Christ to the church at Laodicea, those whom I love, I reprove and discipline so be zealous and repent.

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come to him to do just that.

It'll be hard, and it'll be terribly humbling, but it's the only road of holiness with our God.

[ 52 : 34 ] Let's pray. Lord, surely in this story about your servant Jacob, you are holding up to each one of us a mirror to our lives.

Give us the grace, we pray, to receive your humbling in our lives. We also might share your holiness and that this world might see the power of Christ to transform sinners into your image.

For Jesus' sake, amen.