

41. He Who keeps Israel (2007)

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Preacher: William Philip

[0 : 00] But we're going to turn now to our reading this morning, which is in Genesis chapter 31, continuing our studies there. If you have one of our visitor's Bibles, you'll find it on page 25, right at the beginning. And we pick up where we left off last time with the story of Jacob.

And we're going to read from verse 17 of Genesis 31 right through to the second verse of chapter 32, really where this episode ends. The chapter and verse divisions, remember, in our Bible are not inspired, and sometimes they're helpful, sometimes they're not so helpful. But in this case, really, we need to go to chapter 32, verse 2 to end the episode. So Genesis 31, then at verse 17.

So Jacob arose and set his sons and his wives on camels. He drove away all his livestock, all his property that he had gained, the livestock in his possession that he had acquired in Padamaran, to go to the land of Canaan to his father Isaac. Laban had gone to shear his sheep, and Rachel stole her father's household gods. And Jacob stole the heart of Laban the Aramean.

Notice the footnote there. Our translation trick just sort of misses the force of that. Rachel stole her father's household gods, and Jacob stole his heart by not telling him that he intended to flee. He fled with all that he had, and rose and crossed the Euphrates, and set his face towards the hill country of Gilead. When it was told Laban on the third day that Jacob had fled, he took his kinsmen with him and pursued him for seven days, and followed close after him into the hill country of Gilead. But God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream by night, and said to him, be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad. And Laban overtook Jacob.

Now Jacob had pitched his tent in the hill country, and Laban with his kinsmen pitched tents in the hill country of Gilead. And Laban said to Jacob, what have you done that you have stolen my heart, and driven away my daughters like the captives of the sword? Why did you flee secretly and steal my heart, and did not tell me, so that I might have sent you away with mirth and songs, with tambourine and lyre?

[2 : 36] And why did you not permit me to kiss my sons and daughters farewell? Now you've done foolishly. It is in my power to do you harm. But the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying, be careful to say nothing to Jacob, either good or bad. And now you've gone away, because you longed greatly for your father's house. But why did you steal my gods? Jacob answered and said to Laban, because I was afraid, for I thought that you would take your daughters from me by force.

Anyone with whom you find your gods shall not live in the presence of our kinsmen. Point out what I have that is yours and take it. Now Jacob didn't know that Rachel had stolen them.

So Laban went into Jacob's tent, and into Leah's tent, and into the tent of the two female servants, but he did not find them. And he went out of Leah's tent and entered Rachel's.

Now Rachel had taken the household gods and put them in the camel's saddle and sat on them.

Laban felt all about the tent, but he did not find them. She said to her father, let not my Lord be angry that I cannot rise before you, for the way of women is upon me.

So he searched, but did not find the household gods. Then Jacob became angry and berated Laban. Jacob said to Laban, what is my offense? What is my sin that you have hotly pursued me?

[4 : 12] For you have felt through all my goods. What have you found of all your household goods? Said it here before my kinsmen and your kinsmen, that they may decide between us.

These twenty years I have been with you. Your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried, and I have not eaten the rams of your flock. What was torn by wild beasts I did not bring to you. I bore the loss myself. From my hand you required it, whether stolen by day or stolen by night.

There I was. By day the heat consumed me, and the cold by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes.

These twenty years I have been in your house. I slaved for you fourteen years for your daughters, and six years for your flock, and you have changed my wages ten times.

If the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the fear of Isaac had not been on my side, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. But God saw my affliction, and the labor of my hands, and rebuked you last night. And labor answered and said to Jacob, The daughters are my daughters, the children are my children, the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine. But what can I do this day for my daughters, or for their children whom they have borne? Come now, let us make a covenant, you and I.

And let it be a witness between you and me. So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar, and Jacob said to his kinsmen, Gather stones. And they took stones and made a heap, and they ate there by the heap. Laban called it Jagar-Sahadutha, but Jacob called it Galid. Laban said, This heap is a witness between you and me today.

[6 : 00] Therefore, he named it Galid and Mizpah, for he said, The Lord watch between you and me, so when we are out of one another's sight. If you oppress my daughters, or if you take wives besides my daughters, although no one will see us, God is witness between you and me.

And Laban said to Jacob, See this heap of the pillar which I have set between you and me, this heap is a witness, and the pillar is a witness. I will not pass over this heap to you, and that you will not pass over this heap and this pillar to me to do harm.

The God of Abraham, and we should read there, The gods of Nahor, the gods of their father, judge between us. So Jacob swore by the fear of his father Isaac. And Jacob offered a sacrifice in the hill country and called his kinsmen to eat bread. They ate bread and spent the night in the hill country. Early in the morning, Laban arose and kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them. And Laban departed and returned home. But Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. And when Jacob saw them, he said, This is God's camp. So he called the name of that place Machinaim, which means two camps. Amen. May God bless to us this his word.

Well, if you'd turn with me to the passage you read there in Genesis 31. And I want to begin this morning by quoting, quoting some words from the great reformer John Calvin, whose commentary on Genesis, I really have to say, I found invaluable as I've been working through this particular section of the book. This passage, John Calvin says, shows us to what straight Jacob was reduced, so that he had no hope of deliverance but in flight. For Laban had determined to hold him all his life as a captive, as if he'd been a slave bound to the soil or sentenced to the mines. Therefore, let us also learn, by his example, when the Lord calls us, courageously to strive against every kind of obstacle, and not to be surprised if many arduous difficulties oppose themselves against us.

And since we read that the departure of the holy man was affected by stealth and was attended with discredit, that is in the eyes of others, let us learn whenever God obeys us, to turn our minds to such examples as this. We too must expect, says John Calvin, to bear undeserved reproach and marks of infamy. But he says, whenever this may happen to us, let that promise sustain us, that the Lord in his own time will bring forth our innocence as the morning light. Those perturbations, which at the time are troublesome to us, yet tend to our salvation. If only we obediently submit to the will of God, who purposefully thus tries us, that he may indeed show the more fully the care which he takes of us. Now that is simply the plain teaching of the New Testament, isn't it? For all who are Jacob's seed, who are Abraham's seed through faith in Jesus Christ, all who are called to join Jesus Christ as outsiders, outside the camp, as Hebrews 13 puts it, to bear the reproach that he endured.

[9 : 55] Now we're seeing how that's been true for Paul. In our studies in 2 Timothy, in the evenings, he was frequently on his own, deserted by everybody, even deserted by the people in the very churches that he had found it himself. At my first defense, no one stood by me. All deserted me, he said. How desperately lonely and isolated Paul must have felt. All deserted me, he says, but the Lord stood by me and strengthened me so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it.

God didn't desert his servant, but he fulfilled through him everything that he had promised for his part in God's glorious plan of salvation. And so it was for Jacob right here in Genesis chapter 31. He is in dire straits. Accusations of reproach and infamy and discredit are being heaped upon him about the manner of his actions in fleeing Laban. But God did not desert him.

And that's the great refrain of this passage as we read it. But God. But God came, verse 24. But God spoke, verse 29. But God saw, verse 42.

And God met him, verse 1 of chapter 32, with his angels. Behold, says the psalmist, he who keeps Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps.

[11 : 30] The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and from evermore. When God calls his people to follow where he leads and to trust and to obey his sure voice, then however flawed they may be, and whatever folly they might even create for themselves, he will never abandon those who are his.

Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go. I will not leave you. That's what God had said to Jacob.

And that's what we see God delivering on to Jacob in this story before us, as Jacob sets out into the unknown with enemies behind him, with reproach surrounding him, and with certain adversity lying ahead of him.

And what a wonderfully assuring message it is for God to set before us today, to Christian people and to a Christian congregation. Only too aware, aren't we, of our flaws and our failings. And yet each of us humbly seeking to walk in obedience to God's word.

Let's look at this text then and see what God is teaching us about himself, about Jacob's God, about our God, about the Lord who promises to keep us from all evil.

[12 : 59] It's a story about a parting and a pursuit and then a pact, and lastly a very special place. So look first at verses 17 to 21, which speaks of a sudden parting.

A sudden parting, and yet it bears witness to God's promised prospering of Jacob, despite all Jacob's shortcomings. And all the focus here is on Jacob's victory over Laban, both over Laban's wealth and over Laban's worship.

It was a sudden parting, it was something of a sardonic one. And people are very quick to criticize Jacob's actions here. Oh, he shouldn't have run away like that, deceiving Laban.

Oh, and look at Rachel and her theft. What a shocking way for church people to behave.

Extraordinary, isn't it, how Christian people can be so sanctimonious. But they're like the Pharisees who were seeing Jesus, and all the work that he was doing, the marvelous things with he and his disciples.

And the only thing that they could find to say was, why don't you people wash your hands properly? The text here gives us not a single hint of criticism of Jacob.

[14 : 09] In fact, it is quite the reverse. In verse 3 of chapter 31, the Lord had commanded Jacob to get up and go back to Canaan. And Jacob had obeyed him straight away.

We saw last time he went and told his wives. And in verse 13, he repeated his words to Jacob. Now, says the Lord, arise. In other words, get going, Jacob, right now.

So as soon as he had his wives with him, he yielded to no other obstacles. Herein appears the manly strength and constancy of his mind, says John Calvin. And that's absolutely right.

Jacob is acting in obedience to God's clear word. Now, he'll be criticized, of course he will, by Laban.

Just as there'll always be criticism of God's people by the world, when they take action that's commanded by God and his word. The world will always criticize. Just a pity when other Christians join in with them, rather than standing with people seeking to be faithful to God.

[15 : 11] But what the text focuses on here is God's amazing provision for this man, despite all his adversity. Look at verse 18.

With Jacob, we're told, went all his livestock, all the property that he'd gained since he first turned up at Haran, absolutely penniless and pauperized. The story has recounted for us how God saw all Laban's oppression, and how God took away all Laban's wealth and gave it to Jacob, bit by bit. And so now we see that the slave escapes from his master, laden with great wealth. Just as later on, the Israelites would escape from the Egyptians, laden with the gold and the jewels of the Egyptians put into their hand by God.

Now Laban's wealth is plundered, and verse 19, his worship likewise is brought to nothing. His household gods are purloined by his own daughter.

Now we don't know why Rachel took them. Again, this has become a whole focus of moralistic commentators trying to berate her. Well, maybe it was out of spite for her father.

[16 : 21] He certainly earned it. Maybe it was that she was still confused spiritually and wanted to hedge her bets with her gods. But we're not told, and I think that tells us that the writer actually is not interested in Rachel's motive.

What he is interested in is showing us how utterly feeble these gods of Laban really are. As someone says, it's a new crime, godnapping.

How pathetic are these gods? Never mind looking after Laban, they can't even look after themselves. No wonder the Hebrew name for these gods, teraphim, sounds very suspiciously like the Hebrew word for dung pellets.

He's mocking them. Rachel stole Laban's gods, verse 20, and Jacob literally stole Laban's heart. As I said, the translation tricked here and in verses 26 and 27 misses that play on words. It means that Jacob stole Laban's ability to discern and to act properly, just as Absalom in 2 Samuel 7 stole the hearts of the people of Israel, made them confused in their thinking to support him, rendered them foolish.

[17 : 32] Poor Laban. Rachel leaves him with no gods, and Jacob leaves him with no gumption. So we're told he doesn't know what's happening, and by the time he does in verse 21, Jacob is gone, and is at least three days away, heading for the land of Canaan, and heading for liberation.

Jacob, verse 21, set his face towards the hill country of Gilead. May not have been very dignified, and no doubt it may have looked bad, and even suspicious to the people round about.

But sometimes God's people find themselves in that position. And God has blessed Jacob, and God is directing Jacob. And Jacob is acting in faith, in clear obedience to God's word.

He didn't stop and say, Oh Lord, this isn't going to look very good. Let's rethink the plan. No, he arose. And set his face towards the promised land.

Just like Abraham. He went as the Lord had told him. That's what the Bible means by faith. Doing what the Lord has told you.

[18 : 48] But following God obediently doesn't mean that there will always be a trouble-free journey, does it? And that's what the next scene shows. Verses 22 to 42 tell us that that sudden parting is followed by a swift pursuit.

And yet what this bears witness to is God's protection of Jacob, exactly according to promise, despite the near self-inflicted disaster that his family seems to be so prone to.

And all the focus here is on the vindication of Jacob in the face of Laban's accusations and his threats of harm. And even more importantly, on the public demonstration of the absolute triumph of Jacob's God over the powerless deities of Laban's pagan worship.

Now Laban doesn't hear, we're told, for three days because there's such a great distance between the camps. Remember, that had been Laban's own insistence because he didn't trust Jacob and here it comes back to bite him.

But when he does hear, he's absolutely furious and he's in hot pursuit for seven days. So Jacob and his entourage have ten days of very uneasy travel, no doubt with a knot in the pit of their stomachs, no doubt with frequent glances back for any sign of a dust cloud coming behind them.

[20 : 08] And then eventually they realize that Laban has caught up. Verse 25, he seems to have outflanked them and cut them off and the two camps are pitched against one another rather like two armies.

But what Jacob doesn't yet know is that Laban has had an encounter with God. Verse 24, he came in a dream and he said, Laban, you touch Jacob and you're mincemeat.

That's what the Hebrew says anyway. Don't even speak to Jacob, he says. Pull up and shut up.

That's what God's saying. Well, Laban, you see, can't keep his mouth shut actually.

He pours out the most incoherent and contradictory lot of really indignant drivel in verses 26 to 30. It's replete with irony, isn't it?

What have you done? He says. And did we last hear that? Delicious, isn't it? Exactly Jacob's words. When Laban deceived him about Leah and about Rachel. Then there's all this outraged accusation.

[21 : 18] You kidnapped my daughters by force. Oh, sorry, Laban. We're very glad to see the back of you. And then the sheer hypocrisy. Verse 28, Oh, I wanted to throw you a leaving party, he says.

It's quite a likely story, that one. And then all this pompous denunciation. Verse 28, Oh, you've done foolishly. It's another classic, isn't it, of sanctimonious piety.

You hear it all the time. Oh, it's the way you've gone about it. That's so wrong and foolish. Whether you've done it differently, I would be with you. Well, that's always a lot of absolute tosh.

As William still says, No one is ever a fool to do what God says. Although all the world might think so. And that's true.

Even if it could have been done better, as things always can, of course, because nobody's perfect. And Laban admits that he knows Jacob is doing what God has told him.

[22 : 18] The true God, that is. The God who's alive and who speaks and actually does command his people. And he knows that Jacob has got every reason to want to go home. But look at verse 30.

Oh, Jacob, why did you steal my gods? It's such a pathetic whimper, isn't it, to end this diatribe that began with all that bluster. Jacob's God of awesome power has Laban totally under his control and on a leash.

And Laban knows it. But Laban assumes that Jacob has got total power over his gods. In other words, Jacob, Laban knows that his household gods are utterly powerless and yet he still bows down before them.

Isn't that ridiculous? Yeah, that's the folly, isn't it, of all idolatry, whether of the religious or the secular variety. Human beings constantly devote their lives to things that have absolutely no power to save and satisfy them, but do have power very often to enslave them, to tyrannize their lives. How many people are slaves to material things, slaves to ideology, slaves to ambition, slaves to false gods of so many kinds. They know they're nothing.

[23 : 36] They bow down and worship them. Why have you stolen my gods? Notice, by the way, Jacob's reasonable answer to these ramblings and accusations.

Verse 39, he's just plain, I left because I was afraid. Afraid of your self-interest and of your unreasonable ways. Well, he had jolly good reason to be afraid, wasn't he? And the wisest thing he could do in the circumstances was to depart suddenly with all his family.

Christians can sometimes be so sentimental and over-spiritual. The Bible just isn't like that. It's so down to earth. It knows that the household of faith is often under threat.

That's why the household of faith's leaders always are called not to be naive, but to guard the flock against false wolves and those who would come in and do harm to the household of faith.

Read Acts chapter 20. Read Paul's charge to the Ephesian elders. Read Paul's letters. There are times when fear and flight is the only realistic course of action.

[24 : 45] Flight from dangerous doctrine. Flight from dangerous practice. Flight from things that can endanger the whole family of faith. That's what Jacob's doing here with his family.

He's seeking to be a responsible leader of his household. Notice he doesn't get into a great argument with Laban about the timing of his escape and all that stuff. He actually replies quite modestly.

He just denies any guilt over kidnapping the gods. In fact, he takes the winds right out of Laban's sails by saying, look, I've nothing to hide. Feel free to search. Search everyone. Anyone who's found guilty will die.

Verse 32. Oh dear. But Jacob did not know that Rachel, his beloved wife, had taken the gods. So what's going to happen now? Is this going to turn to tragedy? How well the storyteller ratchets up the telling of it, doesn't he? Just imagine if this were a film. Verse 33.

[25 : 43] He searches Jacob's tent and into Leah's tent and into the servant's tent and no, nothing. And then he goes into Rachel's tent.

Sure, the game is up now. Surely. But no. The gods, we're told, these powerful deities, they're in a saddlebag under Rachel's backside.

First they're kidnapped and now they're used as a cushion. And so Laban searched verse 44 but he did not find them. And then the pièce de résistance.

Rachel says, I'm sorry, I can't get up. It's my time of the month. And so Laban is utterly defeated. And Laban's gods, well the utterly demeaning picture that we have here is that Laban's gods are just being used as a sanitary towel.

The utter humiliation of these pathetic gods and their devotees. That's what this story is all about. Do you see? Moses readers would see it so utterly.

[26 : 55] Plainly, this is a spiritual battle. It's a contest about whose god is the true god. Just as the plagues in Egypt were a great contest before the Exodus to show who is the real god with power in heaven and earth.

The gods of the Egyptians or the god of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. And the Bible loves to mock the folly of all human religion with all its false gods.

Read 1 Samuel chapter 5 with the Philistines god Dagon who falls flat on his face and shatters in pieces before the ark of the covenant of the God of Israel. Or read that marvelous story in 1 Kings chapter 18 on the top of Mount Carmel where Elijah is taunting the prophets of Baal as they call on

their god.

Oh, shout a bit louder. Maybe he's deaf. Oh, maybe he's shut himself in the bathroom and he can't hear you. Shout a bit louder. It's all about which god is the real god the true god the only god with power to save.

And here the Lord the true god saves Jacob and protects him despite this self-inflicted danger of Rachel's actions. God vindicates Jacob and his household.

[28 : 11] He justifies them you might say despite all their sin and their folly and their stupidity. Because this god is a god of grace and of mercy who protects his own who keeps those who trust him and who follow him despite all their mess and all their mistakes.

Aren't you glad? Aren't you glad that as a Christian believer today you can say with a psalmist the god of Jacob is my fortress? Aren't you glad about that? I'm glad.

And Jacob certainly was as he was unashamed to testify in verses 36 to 42. He doesn't mince his words does he? He challenges Laban he goes on the front foot to expose his hypocrisy and all his empty rhetoric.

It's not wrong for Christians to do that and be on the front foot. You're accusing me of wrong he says but it's you who are wrong Laban. I've slaved for you for 20 years. I've been more than fair to you.

I've more than paid my way. You've diddled me endlessly changing my wages 10 times. If it weren't for my God he says the God of my father Abraham if it weren't for him protecting me you would have fleeced me for everything you could have.

[29 : 30] But God saw my affliction and the labor of my hands and he rebuked you last night. that language there in verse 42 if you see it it would be very familiar language to Moses readers.

They'd recognize it immediately. It's right out of the story of the Exodus. The Egyptians they would have sent Israel away empty handed but God had promised otherwise. God saw their affliction we read in Exodus.

God came down to save them and they also left Egypt laden with plunder. And it's strong language Jacob uses there is a time to be silent but there's also a time to speak when the church is being maligned and defamed.

We've had to do that ourselves at times recently when we've been maligned by contemporary labans and no doubt we'll have to do more of it in the future. But notice notice that Jacob's greatest defense is simply to point not only to his own conduct being righteous as he does but also also to the irrefutable evidence of God's clear presence and protection with him and with his household. Despite all its dysfunction God has blessed and prospered and increased Jacob's household. You know the Lord Jesus says that there's rejoicing among the angels of heaven when even one sinner repents and finds life.

[31 : 05] And doesn't that rejoice our hearts and encourage our hearts more than absolutely anything to know that there are people coming to know the Lord in our midst here all the time. To know that the Lord is among us to protect and to bless.

No one can gainsay can they the presence of the work of the Spirit of Christ when he makes himself so obvious in doing these things. And Laban couldn't gainsay Jacob.

What can I do? He says in verse 43. What can he do but do what he does which is to sue for peace. And verses 43 to 54 are all about a sworn pact.

A pact that confirms God's peace surrounding Jacob according to promise despite the hostility and the jealousy towards the covenant family and despite the inevitable tensions that there will be always between that family and those who are outside the true household of faith.

The evidence of God being with this household is overwhelming for all their faults. Laban does not like it but he cannot deny it much as he would love to.

[32 : 17] And so just as we've seen with the Philistine kings previously with both Abraham and with Isaac he wants a sworn covenant a pact of peace. It'll be a witness he says the guarantee fair dealing between us between our territories and our tribes.

Now Jacob has absolutely no need for such a pact of course not. He has the living God as his guarantor as his protector but notice how ready he is to be gracious and to be conciliatory to Laban. It's Jacob at all in verse 45 who responds and sets up the first pillar. He initiates this heap of stones to make the pact. John Calvin again Jacob freely complained indeed when it was right to do so but when the season of pacification arrived he showed that he cherished no rancor and truly it becomes

the children of God not only with alacrity to embrace peace but even ardently to search for it as we are commanded in Psalm 34.

I will teach you the fear of the Lord turn away from evil and so do good seek peace and pursue it well Jesus said blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the sons of God not easy is it to make peace with the likes of Laban who's mistreated you who's maligned you who's pursued you wanted to destroy you but this is the word of the Lord John Calvin by the way was not a soft sentimentalist that's for sure but he does rightly I think draw attention to a right attitude here doesn't he Jacob freely stretches out that hand of kindness to Laban and the Bible commands all of us to do likewise doesn't it but that is not the same as surrender that's equally clear here Jacob takes the initiative Jacob will not acquiesce you notice in the naming that

Laban gives but he insists on his own name in Hebrew in the language of the promised land Galid verse 48 and Mishpah because he's invoking the name of the Lord the God of Abraham is the one who is watching over absolutely everything Laban of course has a very different view of this God who watches them for Laban he regards this God with fear and with distrust just as Jacob regards this God with love and with trust but Laban knows that he is a powerful God and he invokes his watchful eye on Jacob because he doesn't trust Jacob look at verse 50 solemnly invoking God to protect Jacob against taking other wives isn't that rich the only reason Jacob had more than one wife in the first place was because of Laban's deceptive behavior sanctimonious nonsense Laban hasn't changed one bit has he he swears in verse 53 by the

[35 : 23] Lord but also do you notice by the God of Nahor and the gods of their father the Hebrew there is plural he's swearing by all the gods but Jacob remains absolutely clear in his witness in verse 53 do you see he swears by the one God the fear of Isaac the awesome one of Isaac his father Laban's gods were lost by the way had he forgotten that it's amazing isn't it how people can be can be faced with the overwhelming reality of living faith and of the manifest presence of the true and the living God and yet they can cling on so readily to the trappings of pure dead religiosity as if there was no difference between them as if there was no difference between dead hopeless gods and the presence of the gospel of the living God that builds and that strengthens the church as though that was just the same as the false gospel of dead church that kills the church dead and buries it but people do that's what

Laban does here between being spiritually alive and confused and dead people there can be a measure of peace in earthly terms that's what we're seeing here but never true fellowship on the deeper level that cannot be so as William still puts it Jacob humbly cooperates and shares a covenant meal with Laban but well he knows it's a covenant of separation on whose terms Laban goes back to obscurity and he onto illustrious historicity and eternal destiny Laban Laban cuts a sorry figure doesn't he here in verse 55 as he heads home he's seen so much this man of God's revelation over twenty years and more God has given him every opportunity to embrace the God of Jacob the Lord of heaven and earth for himself and yet he hardens his heart and he turns away he wants this God to protect his property yes but that's all nothing more so Laban departs retreating to his home no doubt to get some new gods to keep up appearances gods that look respectable but gods that certainly don't interfere with your life and with your plans and gods that are always there to bless the very things that you want them to bless when you want them Laban arose and returned home but Jacob verse one went on his way and the angels of God met him and when Jacob saw them he said this is God's camp so he called the name of the place Machiniam which means two camps the episode concludes here with these two little verses about Machiniam in

Gilead about a strengthening place for Jacob and this encounter affirms in a very personal and wonderful way God's presence with Jacob despite all the hurdles that still lie in the future for him I can imagine that Jacob was feeling pretty wrung out and stressed after all that had happened don't you think a roller coaster of flight of pursuit of standoff and then this pact of peace the amazement of seeing God at work so extraordinarily and yet with Laban's departure surely his thoughts turning to the future what's next what of Esau what of his parents what of the land of Canaan all these unknowns and unknown unknowns I bet it was hard going for Jacob to get up and keep going after that don't you it's that sense of flatness that sense of anticlimax after the adrenaline rush that sense of rumination the creeping doubts the personal doubt the self doubt am I really doing the right thing there's no going back now for

Jacob bridges are burned he's in limbo what lies ahead what does the future hold it's a familiar feeling isn't it in our Christian lives it's quite a familiar feeling for many of us right now isn't it but God

had spoken and Jacob knew God's command and Jacob had set his face towards the land of promise and so we read he went on his way just five words that conceal a great deal of turmoil and inner wrestling and emotion and yet as he went on his way entrusting obedience to God God himself drew very near his servant he opened the heavens and he gave Jacob a wonderful assurance of his nearness he wasn't alone it's not just

[40 : 53] Jacob's household out on this lonely road there are two camps his own camp and one that is the camp of God himself with all his heavenly hosts surrounding him it's as if God's saying to Jacob Jacob look I've been with you all this time and my angels have been watching over you all these twenty years since you last saw them with your own eyes at Bethel twenty years ago as a psalmist of Psalm 34 reminds us the angel of the Lord encamps around him and delivers them Jacob had God's promise and Jacob had experienced God's protection but here at this critical juncture in his journey God gave him a wonderfully special assurance a deep sense of his presence with him to assure him just when he needed it most you're not alone Jacob I'm here with all my angelic armies and they're around you and all your loved ones rather like that marvelous story in 2nd

Kings 6 do you remember when Elisha's servant looks out the window and sees all the armies of Syria surrounding the prophet's house and he's panicking and Elisha the prophet prays Lord open his eyes and he does he looks out again and he sees all around those horses and chariots the horses and the chariots of the heavenly host of God's camp you know sometimes God does things just like that doesn't he to strengthen and to hearten his servants when they're flagging in the midst of a time of real conflict perhaps before a time of real trial and testing that lies ahead something or someone just comes into our path to bring that special sense of personal assurance of the nearness of our God there's a wonderful tenderness in this don't you think it certainly shows God's terrible might to Jacob when he opens the heavens he's the lord of hosts the lord of the armies of heaven and yet it also shows him his tender mercy he's the

God who draws near he's the God who comes down he's the God who comes to be with his flagging people to strengthen them just like a nurse with a soothing balm not like those feeble domesticated gods carried around in saddlebags like Laban's Eustace idols never this is the God who is the fear of Isaac the awesome lord of heaven and yet he is also the God who comes down and draws near he's Emmanuel God with us and near us as he was near Jacob and because friends God draws near and he draws near forever in the person of his own son our Lord Jesus Christ the one who draws near is one who knows us he knows our frame he knows that we're dust he knows what it's like to feel alone and to do better he knows what it's like to be struck by temptation to be surrounded by the enemies and by him when he saw off the devil's temptations in the world and it's just as he was embarking on his earthly ministry he was met with angels so also he has promised never to leave us alone without his heavenly help he promised to send his holy spirit to minister to us to strengthen each one of us in our time of need and in our battles

I will be with you he says and indeed his angels are ministering spirits sent to surround and to serve those that he's saving remember Paul in Corinth when he was desperately alone facing opposition and the angel of the Lord appeared and said don't be afraid same again when he was on the ship in the torment of the Mediterranean sea in that storm fear not Paul I'm with you the place of fear the place of uncertainty the place of exhaustion becomes the place of strengthening the place of enabling so that he can go on onwards in faith and in trust in the God who has promised for Jacob that strengthening place was Machinaim in Gilead famous for its medicinal balm and surely that encounter was a wonderful balm for

Jacob's weary soul that day one of my abiding boyhood memories is of listening with my father on a Sunday afternoon to some of the records that he loved and one of them was a record by the wonderful black American singer Paul Robeson and one of the songs on that record was the lovely Negro spiritual there is a balm in Gilead and heard it for years and I looked it up and found it this week on Google and I listened to Paul Robeson's sonorous bass voice singing that song that I remembered so well and really brought tears to my eyes with the memories but it ministered to my soul with its words listen sometimes I feel discouraged and think my work's in vain but then the Holy Spirit renews my soul again there is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole there's a balm in Gilead to heal the sin sick soul friends there is a strengthening place for all the spiritual seed of Jacob through faith in Jesus

[47 : 01] Christ he who keeps Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps and he's near near to the broken hearted and the crushed in spirit near to all who call on him in truth one greater than all the angels a great high priest in the heavens able to sympathize with our weaknesses and he says to everyone who is weary and burdened with the battles of faith come to me and I will give you rest peace so friends as we set our faces towards our heavenly calling as we encourage each other on in our path of obedience let us with confidence draw near to the throne of grace for that like Jacob we also might receive mercy and grace to help us in our time of need

Jacob went on his way and the angels of God met him let's pray gracious God our heavenly father the fear of Isaac and the great God of Jacob how we thank you that you've promised that as we set our face towards your heavenly kingdom and as we walk in faith with our Lord Jesus Christ so you will walk with us now and always to guard our going out and our coming in from this day forward and forever more so keep us we pray in the protection and in the peace and in the provision of your gracious presence for Jesus sake amen again on to like how to help